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**THEIR DAY IN COURT**



# THEIR DAY IN COURT

BY  
PERCIVAL POLLARD



NEW YORK AND WASHINGTON  
THE NEALE PUBLISHING COMPANY

1909

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## INTRODUCTION

WEARIED alike of the sea and the consciousness of her own sophistication, the fairest of all readers dropped her book on the deck.

The man beside her picked it up.

"An old one?" he said. "As old as—that?"

"Why not?"

"There are so many new ones."

"So many, yes; but new, no."

"You think they can all say, with the returning spirits of men: 'We have been here before'?"

"Precisely."

"There remains," he smiled, "the Marconigram for the day. Shall I get it for you?"

"Not for—oceans! If there is one thing more unoriginal than our literature it is our newspapers."

Whereupon he left her still staring, sophisticated and therefore sad, into the sea, while he communed with himself upon the melancholy case of those who know so much of literature as it is in covers that they cannot find the literature that is in the life about them.

For to those who have eyes and minds to see, the passing hours present such stuff as makes ridiculous the poverty of invention in our modern authors.

One lady of our Central Park Faubourg may choose to exercise her prose and our patience by Jacobite imitations; this author may re-write the works of Mlle. de la Ramee, substituting chauffeurs for guardsmen; and other wordmongering opportunists may re-tell all the sagas of the vikings with money-bags taking the place of brawn. Granted that all this may make for some disgust, yet we should by no means despair. Invention may dry in



those whose *metier* invention should be; still is life daily, hourly, coining such material as more than makes up for the fountains that are drained.

The plots, so the tired folk tell us, were all used long ago; we may find novel variants; nothing more. There are only so many stories in the world, and most of them unfit to print. And they throw down upon the deck, or the desk, or the drawing-room floor, the disgusting ineptitude of the moment.

Meanwhile, out in the real world, the Man in the Street, if only he knew it, may enjoy from the varicolored life of our town and our time, the most wonderful of literary entertainments. Always, if one would keep one's balance in the world, one must bear in mind that Man in the Street. The moment one shuts the door against him, in any of the arts, one enters a shut chamber, where nothing real can long live, and where one must oneself, sooner or later, die the living death of the scholiast, the theorist or the mere mechanician. You may safely let go, perhaps, both the simple life and the simple spelling, the more so as they become shibboleths and so lose their simplicity; but you cannot safely let go the Man in the Street. If you do let him go, he finds you out soon enough; it is not your literature that will satisfy him then; it is only life itself, the life from which your closet-door has shut you.

"Literature," says the small mind that is not yet out of the shibboleth stage, "is my life." When that small mind begins to grow, if ever it does, it finds out that literature, especially to the specialist therein, must, to be at its grandest, play but a tiny rôle in the cosmic Scheme.

The great masters in all the arts have so builded that in their lives the details of paint, of rhyme, of prose, of tone, have been—but details.

We must all, if we would be worth anything more than the hissing of froth in a pot, look upon life in the large, upon art in the little. In having, however, unconsciously,

that large unthinking outlook, the Man in the Street is vastly better off, vastly more fitted to pass judgment, than is the horde of petty pessimists who at times bewail the unoriginality of all things written.

Looking always on the present, as oblivious of the past as is his newspaper, the Man in the Street finds daily the most stimulating feast of Things that Happen. It is in the things that happen—ay, and even in those chronicles of them, the newspapers—that we may find, with the Man in the Street, the optimism of which our hours spent with printed books may have deprived us.

Where, on what shelf bearing the confessions of Jean Jacques, of Marie Bashkirtseff, of Prosper Merimée's Unknown, of the Portuguese Nun, or even of George Moore, will you find anything more poignant than the letters of "Billy Brown"? This was a young girl in the State of New York whose lover was convicted, some years ago, of having drowned her; if you have already forgotten those letters it is proof that you do not know literature when you see it. What Flaubert ever surpassed the story of Evelyn Thaw? To discover that soul would surely have taken a still greater microscopist than the author of *Emma Bovary*. To the Man in the Street, in this town and that, both these were figures so typical, so real, that he knew them as we know an old hat. There they were: shapes of real life, that one could see and hear and touch. Familiarity breeds no contempt in the more primitive of us; about lives so familiar as these the Man in the Street finds their very nearness the most efficacious glamour.

If we decry the stories of this sort as just common, every-day stories of the town, we deny, so doing, our own sense of humanity. Such stories, such lives, are to the forms of literature what some slang phrases are to language, the vitalising elements. If literature really depended on the sterile inventive faculties of professional authors, it would indeed be in poor case. Minimize the

melodramatic as the most timid or the most artistically sophisticated of us will, in real life things do happen, and in real life also, despite the bewildering verbiage of the newspapers, things do get written.

Common stories of the town, you say again,—you, sophisticated ones, on sea or land—and you say they are as old as are womankind and mankind. True, exactly true; the womankind and the mankind that jostle us hourly are what, if we be human rather than divine, must interest us more vitally than any other womankind or mankind in any other space of time.

It is only as we are human that we can have interest for men or for gods.

If I venture to believe that the general reader may find interest in this book, which is to be chiefly about literature, it is because I know that my being a critic has never prevented my being human. Unflatteringly mine has been the attitude of one human being discussing the humanities with other human beings. If you prefer scholastic utterances from the closet, this is not the book for you. A critical career that has surveyed the printed wheat and chaff of a score or so of years has not driven me to either the closet or the cloister; it is too late to begin the grand Olympian manner; for that you must go elsewhere.

To have conserved one's humanity throughout a considerable critical activity is surely something of an achievement. Humanity has meant for me optimism, and optimism so impatient of aught save the best that the thoughtless will probably call it pessimism. You will have plenty of opportunity, in the following pages, to decide for yourself. What I am now concerned about driving home to you is that this candid statement of much that is wrong with American literature is by one who has its welfare at heart, one who, in his warfare against things as they are, has always fought in the open, one who pre-



tends to no sort of distinction save that of being able to see clearly and of not being afraid to speak boldly.

You may see, in these pages, many blows struck. All of them will have seemed deserved, and all meant right heartily. My enemies were made long ago; if this book do nothing else than assure them of my continuing disesteem it will have achieved a success that I shall not despise. Temperamentally I have never been able to distinguish the murder from the murderer; denouncing a crime against literature has never seemed to me so efficacious, or so honest, as denouncing the criminal. If I seem peculiar in that viewpoint, it is because a majority of our critics have been too fond of compromise, too time-serving, to keep the general public on anything like familiar terms with the truth. It is the truth you will find in this book, as I see it. To many men many different things are represented by the word truth; I do not pretend for a moment to give you your notion of truth, or even an abstract, impersonal notion of it. For this, above all else, you are to remember, if you are to come with me at all, on the critical excursion that follows: these are my personal impressions. They pretend to nothing else. If you want the fine impersonal attitude, this is not the shop for you; you will find plenty of others to supply the article. As you will find hereinafter set forth more explicitly, my theory and practice of criticism have never found the slightest value in what was not an individual expression of an individual opinion.

You will find out, soon enough, whether behind these personal opinions of mine there is such personality as to justify my labor in writing and your patience in reading this book. It has seemed to be worth doing because it is something that nobody else has thought fit to do; the generally accepted critical attitude is the complacent one that avers all to be well with the world and supposes none to be fool enough either to doubt or to cavil. If the suggestion that the book be one with a purpose is like to

frighten you off, let me hasten to assure you that it has no other purpose than that of recording a critical career that has led neither to riches nor to fame, but has left me with my eyes and my enthusiasm still open, my humanity still unsoured. There will be many indictments brought, many idols shaken. You are quite at liberty to say that these are evidently the frothings of a failure; you may fling phrases at me, teaching that criticism is the last resort of impotent aspirations; you shall by nothing diminish the esteem in which I hold myself. Who else should hold me in esteem if I despise myself? Were we not talking of Truth? Let us lay our cards on the table then; what the points on my cards tell is that these are my personal impressions, put before you as vividly as possible, for you to take or to leave.

I mean to put as clearly as possible what seem to me the Case of American Letters and its Causes. The conclusions have been reached after a good many years of uninterrupted work in critical survey of current letters. To point the argument it has often been necessary to invade the field of Letters in England, and even in tongues other than English; but throughout these pages the central theme is never lost sight of. That same central theme, harboring an honest belief in the decent welfare of Literature in America, has ever been mine in the contributions I have made in years past to our critical periodicals. What is perishable in a periodical, however, need not be so in a book; so, believing in the greater permanence possible to these present pages, I am taking such pains in preparing my reader now as I never thought fit to take in all the years that I have been writing, mostly anonymously, for the reviews. Into the heart of my contention the reader can plunge soon enough, what I wish to prepare him about is the sort of person the contender is.

Upon the process of the birth or manufacture of poets you shall learn nothing from me, since there is little poetic

in me, save perhaps a youthfulness that is an unconscionable time a-dying. Nor can I inform you about the generality of critics, whether born or made, whether like Topsy a growth, or like tenors a disease. My own critical concerns are quite enough trouble to me. I foresee plenty of opportunities for leading the reader into by-paths of personality, of anecdote and experience other than literary; time enough for all that; time, now and here, only to insist that, just as no man is altogether bad, so is he not always a critic, nor ever exclusively a critic. Even a critic may live in the philosophy of Candide, and, as each year passes, interpret "*Il faut cultiver notre jardin*" more and more literally; yet the dunces of our day need not take heart too blithely, since such critic can easily stop pruning a Malmaison and take to cudgeling their maladroitness.

Enough of perorating. If you care for personal impressionism, for a hearty prejudice or so, and even for a little passion, you may find something to interest you. If you believe in the impersonal attitude toward literature, and if you are fond of academic standards, I would bid you good-day; we are not of the same kidney; you would not read me if I cajoled you until Doomsday.

Let us get to our Case.



PART ONE

WOMEN, WOMANISTS AND MANNERS





## CHAPTER ONE

THE case of pure literature in America is comparable to the case of My Lady Parvenu's grand rout: crowded and worthless. Quality is utterly sacrificed for quantity. The rout comprises everybody, which to the discriminating spells Nobody. The finer sort, accidentally coming upon these scenes, must needs murmur: "Bounders, outsiders—no class!" and proceed elsewhither. The snob may utter that remark too loud, and, so doing, lessen its force; yet even that shoddy preciosity may have its merits, for it at least tries to imitate the finer example, not the example in mere multiplication.

The ambition in both cases lies sheerly toward vast figures. In the one case it is desired to state that so many hundred covers were laid, and so many dollars spent on favors; in the other all details are subservient to the purely commercial one of the number of books sold in a week, a month, a year. So many millions of dollars were represented at My Lady's rout; so many thousands of this or that novel were sold in such and such a period and place. Before the advance of commercialism all else retreats. Birth and breeding in the one case; style, workmanship and originality in the other. How often is it the quality, to use that word most narrowly, of our most notorious books that we hear discussed? If we do hear books talked of, how often is not such talk the pure parrot chatter of those who think merely the thoughts of others? If one hears literature talked of at all, is it not mostly in terms of mathematics?

"Jones," we hear, "has built a ten-thousand-dollar cottage from the profits on his new serial." Or, "That new thing of Brown's has gone into six figures."

It was by no means always thus. Let us not deny the material progress we have made. The change has come in the last decade; history will have to note the fact that not until after the war with Spain did American literature, still thinking only in terms of the material, throw away entirely the leading strings that had been held in England. Year after year, before that, we saw the same thing happening, the dreary successions of imported fame, and nothing save foreign writings on our literary bargain counters. Year after year our writers seemed only to clutch the edges and fringes of anything ever so remotely resembling success. There was a success of esteem here and there, perhaps; in thinking back to that past decade I recall some bright moments amid the gloom; but the public—the great surging, half-educated public, that likes to parade its occasional acquaintance with the names of books and plays only to ape an appearance of intellectual sprightliness—the great American public mostly contented itself with reading novels bearing the hall-mark *Made in England*. Long and justly that supercilious question, “Who reads an American book?” rankled unanswerable. Time was when the annual count of books produced in our language showed England first, America a bad second.

Those times are no more.

Arrogant islanders no longer ask their hateful question. We write, we print, we read, at a devouringly prosperous rate. Never before has our republic of letters been so prosperous. Dollars are plentiful. Publishers build houses, and authors are permitted to spread rumors of having built cottages. The presses groan as never they did before—even machinery, one opines, may have its limits in silent patience. Libraries grow merrily where once naught flourished save the ravening mortgage. Though literature may not yet be a subject for general conversation as are politics, crime and the theatre, yet it is not to be denied, still keeping grimly to the mathe-

matics of the case, that more American books are written, more American books are read to-day than ever before. Indeed, if our tendency toward quantity increase at the prevailing rate, the English publishers will have to reverse the habits of other years, and turn to America for grist to supply their mills.

The mills of the gods, we are often told, grind slowly. Our publishers, then, cannot be accounted godlike, for their mills run mostly to speed and quantity. There are other essentials in which publishers differ from the gods, a difference that might afford some sombre student, of the industrious and melancholy cast, say, of the late George Gissing, material for a tragic fiction to be entitled "The Gulf." For the present purpose, however, it suffices to insist on the already stated difference between the mills of the gods and the mills of the publishers. The speed and the output of the latter increase annually. There must be no stopping of the wheels; always it must be possible to cry out in public the name of a book that, whatever its quality, is indubitably the newest. Scarcely is one novel become what is called the rage before another crowds it out of the public memory.

*If, in the present argument, mere fiction, the mere novel, seem insisted on to the exclusion of other forms of literature, that is because the period we live in has allowed poetry and such prose as is not fiction to remain wofully subordinate. Publishers, press-agents and the public have vied with one another in spreading the superstition that "a book" means only "a novel."*

Considered commercially, as one considers the growing output of steel, or coal, or cotton, our tendency toward printing the most books in the world may have its merits. A great many more printers are doubtless earning a presumably honest—it all depends on the point of view—living than before; the rate at which our forests are disappearing to feed the paper-mills and the printing-presses is measurably accelerated; and there must needs

be a constantly growing demand for spectacles, a fine thing for the opticians and oculists. No matter how coarse the chaff, it is grist for some mill or other. The art of literature may be suffering, but a number of trades and professions are gaining; in the general computation, then, you ask, should not something be written on the profit side?

I leave that to the economists. It is literature that is at stake; the fine, fat figures of commerce have nothing to do with literature. Our growth is sheerly a matter for statistics. One might as well argue that because of an increased birth-rate we were a more cultured people. To accept the specious arguments of the booksellers would be equivalent to admitting the superior wisdom of the negro and the rabbit. Prosperous publishing seasons no more imply artistic progress in our literature than do good theatrical years, from the box-office viewpoint, necessarily mean advance in dramatic technics or originality. If the statistics of the publishers and the booksellers mark an increased volume of volumes, that increase deserves record only as does the increase in crime or railway accidents—mere mathematics. The persons who argue otherwise—the marketmen of letters—forget that in literature bulk and permanence have nothing in common.

The literature of an age, a decade, or a year, is to be judged only by the verdict of posterity. And posterity is vastly scornful of aught that lacks the saving grace of quality. The circulation figures of a hundred years ago touch us now not at all; out of the popularities of that period nothing remains that had not the conserving salt of true art.

Of quality, of arresting genius, of fine technic, what do we find in our contemporary letters? Consider the successes of recent years, the titles most talked about, the authors most mispronounced in the parlor-cars: where will these be when posterity applies its test? In fiction, in poetry, in essays, what have we accomplished? Have

we even a tendency that deserves the name? Have we the warfare of rival schools, rival professors of technic, competing methods in the art?

In other years, with the Prosperity flag not yet so flaunted in the breeze, with our cousins overseas still sneering their famed conundrum, "Who reads an American book?" we had at least the storm and stress of skirmishes between realism and impressionism, naturalism and romanticism. Now, not even that. A youthful sickness cured, you say? Wrong! Rivalry on details of art can never harm an art; only when all other concerns are merged in the commercial is the future indeed black.

Find me, if you can, any tendency in our letters save the commercial! Show me any goal save the dollar!

It is true, of course, that literature as a profession appears no longer what it was when Stevenson wrote his memorable Letter to a Young Gentleman. It is now quite possible for the ambitious youth to step from any walk of life and, given a certain amount of luck and a Jesuitic conscience, to achieve as decent financial success in letters as the counting-house or the corner grocery offer. The rewards are undeniably greater and more general than they were. Nothing seems in store for our American writers save prosperity and happiness. The two are synonymous, are they not? Well, for most folk they are; and the world is colored, after all, very largely by what "most folk" think. Yet it is possible to conceive some of our authors, however prosperous, as not happy. Pleasant enough it may be to achieve a modest prosperity in the shadow of the publisher's greater one; to be listed as "among those present" at this or that watering-place, or aboard this or that fashionable ocean-liner side by side with prominent magnates, merchants and their ladies; yet, given a conscience still loyal to any ever so slight ideal of literary art, there must surely be some unpleasant moments. Moments in which the mediocrity the public is willing to praise brings a feeling of dis-



taste; moments in which the impermanence of to-day's reputation insists on being realized. Moments in which the rottenness of the whole fabric becomes visible through the varnish of prosperity.

Once there was the notion that the true poet must live in a garret before the Muse would favor him; to-day, in face of the prosperity to be achieved by merely supplying a demand, it would be quixotic, would it not, to inquire further? Why bother oneself as to the nature of the goods demanded? If the demand is there, the thing to do, surely, is to supply it, even if that means cultivating literature on a little terrapin in a Central Park mansion. There, at any rate, is the gate of decision. If we really possess, here in America, authors capable of producing quality as well as quantity, it is simply a question which path they will choose. In the general reckoning, the reckoning by statistics, the decision may not matter much; the wave of prosperity, the commercial conquests bearing our imprints, will roll on as surely, whether or not the detail of quality be regarded. Yet, in the long run to fame rather than to notoriety, it might be worth our authors' while to try for quality, to lend our vast productiveness the virtues of high and noble art.

The true artists rarely swim with the tide. While some authors taste apparent contemporary success and roll in actual prosperity, the bread and butter of others, quite as accomplished craftsmen, comes by the practice of such writing as, strictly, is not literature at all. Despite the rumor of prosperity that publishers find it profitable to distribute, our most prominent men of letters—I use the popular currency, though these prominent ones are not what I consider worthy banner-bearers!—do not make both ends meet by literature alone.

The greatest man of letters I know is also the most desperately pessimistic. The most enthusiastic optimist on the subject of literature in my acquaintance is a publisher's salesman; I presume he is paid by commission.

Quantity, not quality, is what we worship; I cannot often enough repeat that. With the publishers it is a race to offer the greatest quantity of newest books. With the public it is a race to read the newest just a trifle more speedily than their neighbors. The national temperament, with its tendencies away from conservatism, from allegiance to ascertained merit, its pursuits of constantly changing wills-o-the-wisp, must bear some of the blame. The author, making hay while the sun shines, is willing to produce at a rate that cannot possibly have anything to do with permanent literature. The blame lies between all parties: publisher, public and author.

It is impossible, we have been told, to indict a nation. The impossible, then, the indictment of all those responsible for the fatal prosperity of letters among us, I will not attempt. Yet to accuse, by chapter and verse, the two classes most directly responsible, this book is written.

Those classes are:

Firstly, the Ladies.

Secondly, the Critics.

It is while these were the paramount factors that the plague of book production most devoured our continent. That plague in no wise improved the grammar of the American people as it falls upon our ears; I know of no surer test to prove culture, education, true or shoddy. Our plain people—their plainness including both the plutocrat and the pauper—still continue in blithesome use of such turns as: "Was you to the beach yesterday?" and "I thought I seen you there."

For this, we may thank the ladies and the critics.

Before I make way for the ladies, who have done so much for our artistic stature, and to whom I shall presently offer my meed of appreciation, let me remark upon the phenomenon that the ladies could never have so blessed us if we had ever had critics deserving the name. In their campaign of commercialism the publishers have consciously or unconsciously suppressed the critic; they

have coddled a breed of reviewer who conceives his mission as that of the barker at Coney Island, rather than as an austere keeper of the Gate of Letters. In the last decade or so American publishers have reached a point where they can treat criticism as if it did not exist. They prepare their own "reviews," and *via* the newspapers the public swallow them. They go, at any rate, through the form of swallowing, do our readers; but have they really been deceived? I wonder.

Were there any recognized criticism of letters in America, would it not be possible to name the critics? In a period that has seen and read Matthew Arnold, Walter Pater, George Moore, Oscar Wilde, Edmund Gosse, Walter Lord, Andrew Lang, Arthur Symonds, and as many more, who have been our American critics? Have we, to-day, any critics, of acknowledged and deserved eminence?

Writing about another art, Henry James once declared that a society has to be old before it becomes critical. Superficially that seems just and pertinent. But it happens that in a much earlier day than the present we had some American critics who were considerable in their day and memorable thereafter. The entire New England group was of the critic tribe, and is still famous; Poe was a critic. So that argument fails. The simple truth is that there has been, apparently there is, no man strong enough, fortunate enough, to withstand the full force of the commercialism that is exerted against him the moment he makes it evident he means to be a critic, not a lobbyist. In this place one need only hint at the methods of the commercial cabal (time enough to come to actual instances later): the hitting at the critic through the advertising department of the periodical he uses; the inviolable editorial surrender to the dollar-worship of the counting-house; these are the A B C's of the case.

One man who in my time actually tried the old grand manner, whose genius forbade his working in criticism of any sort save the sturdy and honest expression of him-

self, died of it before his time. His name was Walter Blackburn Harte. I dare say you never heard of it; never mind: you will, if you read this book. He had the large survey, the incisive phrase, the relentless courage of some of the critical gladiators of old; but he lacked—natural corollary—the subserviency that would insure him his avenue to print in the large manner, so he gave up the criticism that was his life, and drooped to journalism, which was his death. He was quite useless at it, and died of it as surely as others die of typhoid.

A literature without critics is like a park without a gate. All the tramps and all the vermin can get in, and presently the proper denizens of the park wish nothing better than to be somewhere else. Our literature is long past the infant industry stage. If commercial success prove nothing else, it at least proves that. The dollar reigns supreme. The ambitious amateur author can even purchase the semblance of success, if he have dollars enough; the publisher and the spineless critic are both anxious to please him. So the gate stands wide open, and all the fools may enter. What is needed at the gate is a club. You may aver that a critical, mental oligarchy carries danger of misuse; that critics wielding actual power should be honest as well as clever, and that the combination is rare. Perhaps; yet between the two evils, a critic with a prejudice to feed, and a publisher with a purse to fill, the former is the lesser. At present we are under the dominance of the latter, untrammelled, triumphant: the publisher and the petticoat.

Between them, the publisher and the petticoat keep our literature headed for nothing save dollars. Art for art's sake may be an absurd shibboleth; yet it is not so damnable as art for dollars' sake, unrelieved by other aim or ambition.

One would be glad to find in our letters a different drift, a finer tendency. If this book arouses contention, if one can be convinced that one's fears are not true, it

will have accomplished no little. I am open to conviction, but it does not seem to me as if there were, on our side of the Atlantic, any longer such a thing as the art of letters; it is merely a trade.

For all of which, we may thank the ladies and the critics.

Under "ladies" I would include those writers who, by nature of the male sex, are yet in their art what by an ingenious meiosis we call feminists.

Under critics must be included the newspapers.

## CHAPTER TWO

As long as we have with us the ladies—God bless 'em!—as we said in more courteous and toasting days, we need never fear that the general reading public will not eventually have all the little mysteries of human life explained. Will you bear patiently a rambling discourse upon some of the work that the ladies, on both sides of the Atlantic, have given us in a period that has been described as “the age of the woman novelist”? Taking a novel here, another there; burrowing about in the rubbish heaps of the present generation, you may come to some conclusion concerning the share the ladies have had in our sentimental education. Such survey need not pretend to be anything other than haphazard; it may still prove its point.

While most of the extremes reached in the erotic were achieved by writers reckoned English, we must by no means forget that at about the period that Bourget's “Physiology of Modern Love” was being discussed by the disciples of Plato everywhere, Amelie Rives astounded our readers with “The Quick and the Dead.” That revelation of what a woman could do in writing her sex down for the general inspection has never, as to essentials, been surpassed; but there have been some very determined efforts made.

Let me remind you of the story by Frank Danby called “Baccarat.”

Some things there are, despite any advance in frankness that we may be supposed to have made since the days of Thackeray's lament, that mere men still consider as without the range of literature. But, say the ladies,



a pest on this reticence! Whatever is human is also fit for human consideration, to say nothing of individual profit. It is all in the treatment. And the ladies—again a toast, if you please!—do know the delicate methods so exquisitely! They prove that our reticence has been a mixture of cowardice and clumsiness. So they advance upon the hitherto secreted corners of our houses. Each corner of the bedroom is robbed of its mystery, to say nothing of each crevice of the bed. I hesitate to mention the only apartment in the house that is so far uninvasioned in our petticoated literature; I shudder to think how short the time before that, too, is a tale that is told. One wonders if the chief chorus on that day will be of envy that one did not do the thing oneself, or of admiration for the finesse with which the trick is accomplished. Surely, in this enlightened age, one should not condemn any effort to chronicle whatever is human. That were to impede artistic progress, to be ungallant to the ladies, and to deprive the public of its right to publicity. Have we not clamored for publicity about our Trusts? How in logic, then, shall we clamor against the ladies who offer to public inspection hitherto secreted intimacies?

What Frank Danby showed us in “Baccarat” were the thoughts and physical sensations of a husband whose wife has been misled into what is politely termed a misstep.

We were shown the erring wife as she is actually committing the error; we were all but placed on a level with those French “agents of morals” who have the fashion of opening the door upon the flagrant deliction itself. The lover plies the lady with wine; he gets her into a condition where she hardly knows what she is doing—and, next day, he lunches with her. There followed some of the heroine’s sensations. Having allowed her husband’s proper place to be temporarily filled we learn that she:

felt ill, desperately miserably ill, with her fevered tongue and cracked lips, and some horrible memory that she could not put away. She remembered, for instance, the night she had heard voices in the room next to hers. She had gone to the manager and said she could not sleep next to these people, he must give her another apartment. It was a shoot of agony, almost physical, when she remembered, when she wondered if the people next to her . . .

Why had we never before described, in detail, the little scenes we so frequently see enacted in our palaces of lobsters and ladies? Why have we not put into fiction the pleasant fellows who ply their damsels with drink in public places and disappear with them to private places? It was not until we read "Baccarat" that we realised what fine scenes those were for vivid elaboration. To describe the advance being made in the lady's intoxication, the exact temper of her sensations as she walked upstairs, the exact topography of the house itself, as, for instance, "their rooms were in the same corridor"—all this sort of thing had long been ready to our hands, yet rarely, outside of the divorce and criminal courts, had we used that fine material.

Well, we know better now. The author of "Baccarat" gave us a seduction scene that must rank with some of the nicest things the ladies have ever done for us. There was that jolly little episode of the siren who seduced the gentleman without legs, Sir Richard Calmady; admirable page! yet not more admirable than the pages in "Baccarat" in which we were made witnesses to a French croupier plying a wife with champagne and then attaching horns to the head of her absent husband.

All that, however, was mere preface. Merely a foretaste of the fine things in store. Literature had given us other seductions. But the sensations of a husband, who, having forgiven his wife and left her lover alive, realises that his wife is in an interesting condition—had we had those sensations, to their lowest physical degree, set down

for us before? In lay reading, not medical? The present critic has tried to keep pace with the literature of at least three languages for a fairish number of years, but the author of "Baccarat" seems a pioneer in this particular. Where had we sensations like this before?

What he saw was the spirit of the Belgian croupier fouling his home. He had impregnated the poor woman with his seed, and until she was free from it she was all deformed and tainted, and gradually grew horrible to him. . . . The air about her was tainted. Not by her, but by that which she carried. . . . The Belgian was out of his reach, but his seed was here and would soon burst into poisonous blossom. Julie would be released from that which was draining her life, this horrible tentacle thing that held her, and tortured her, but which must drop from her soon. . . . He saw now, always, and always more plainly, that yellow Belgian, who lived, and smiled his cursed smile, and knew what he knew. . . . If her nightgown slipped, and the slender throat was exposed, and John would put his hand up to cover her, to care for her in momentary forgetfulness in a love that had not died, the stained fingers were there before him. . . . He could not separate her from the man who had been her lover. What had occurred between them? How was it——? . . . He would not father the bastard. . . .

Surely it is now obvious to you, if by mischance you had forgotten or never known, how delicately this author unveiled for us some of the mysteries of the bedchamber. Other authors had given us the sinning wife. Others, in story and play, had left the husband forgiving, in "Rebellious Susan" and many another modern instance. But the physical sensations of the husband—no, we had shied at that revelation. Our impolite literature, not publicly circulated, told us long ago the sensations of a member of the oldest profession in the world; but it was not until some time after "Baccarat" had opened the way in polite letters—can a lady ever be other than polite?—that

a German writer actually attempted the diary of a member of Mrs. Warren's Profession. So one must surely credit Frank Danby with having let down a barrier or two that had hitherto impeded the progress of art.

If art spell one thing to you, another to me; if you remind me that whatsoever is human must have interest for us; there is just this one retort to make: it is not the subject, it is the treatment that marks the work of art. Of all things abhorrent a puritanism that forbids mention of this subject or that in art seems the most dreadful.

It is only where the artist has offended deliberately against the laws of artistic treatment that the critic may justly condemn. "Baccarat" so offended. So did "Sir Richard Calmady."

Don Juan with a hump was new neither in life nor letters. We all remember that Byron was a devil among the women. But the hero without legs, or at least without such portions of the legs as fall below the knee, doubtless had his attractions for certain perverted types of mind and body.

These are not matters that one considers at great length if one's taste be of the nicest. That the abnormal exerts a charm in some circumstances; that this charm can be explained in terms of the medics, one need not dispute about these things in places other than medical.

Lucas Malet, however, in writing "Sir Richard Calmady" deliberately chose to drag from the world medical a subject that she determined her readers were to accept as polite literature. It was as if she wished to remind us that too great politeness, too much nicety, had their touches of the emasculate; she bade us be bold, scorn the polite, and listen to the truth, even as she saw it; she bade us see life whole, even if we had to see its heroes without legs.

Never for a moment was *Sir Richard Calmady* as much

a creature of flesh and blood as were Richard the Third, Lord Byron, or even Rigoletto. From the moment when his deformity results from his mother having seen the father, maimed, on his deathbed, he is fantastic and improbable. As to whether he was even possible, doctors differ. The author of the book is a woman, and one hates to keep a woman to accuracy, but if she had to meddle with these medical matters—well, the fact is, *Lady Calmady's* condition was such that when she saw her husband's shorn limbs she was already long past the time when it could have affected the unborn heir within her. But let us not linger with the possible; that makes for disenchantment. Let us to other matters. Of all the matters, men and women, in the history of "Sir Richard Calmady," what was more typical of the sort of book it is, of the sort of person who wrote it, of the whole tribe, indeed, of women novelists of that period, than the character of *Helen de Vallorbes*?

Only a woman could have pictured *Helen de Vallorbes*.

She is typical of what women have contributed to English fiction. Some of these contributions lead most vividly to that puzzling paradox: in a period dominated by the puritanism of the Young Person, and by the namby-pamby, the ladylike, we had the curious spectacle of members of the dominant sex—one can never assert often enough that American art is essentially feminine—supplying the most prurient pages that came to us.

But let us not keep *Helen de Vallorbes* waiting.

She had hair of the color of heather honey-comb, and she was given to wearing gowns like the sea. Beware of these women that mingle honey and sea-tints! *Helen* played the very devil with her cousin, *Richard Calmady*, that much is certain. Sometimes her gowns were sea-green, again they were sea-blue. But always as the sea. And as the swimmer plunges into the sea, so did men plunge—but hold, one must not imitate too closely the passionate prose of the author of "Sir Richard Calmady."



Yet one cannot describe *Helen* if one does not use, verbatim, a little of that same passionate prose.

*Helen* had her contrasts. There is no mistaking her sex, nor that of her author. Has anyone pointed out the touch of Irish that is in all women? If not, behold it done! Yes, *Helen* had her contrasts. At first, when *Richard* was an innocent boy, not yet embittered to the point where, as came later, he went about the world sipping all its vices and its honey—other than the *Helen* brand—*Helen* was “a something ravishing, so that you wanted to draw it very close, hold it, devour it,” “a something clear, simple and natural, as the sunlight, and yet infinitely subtle.” Later the author threw the veil a good deal farther back, thus: “*Helen de Vallorbes* had the fine æsthetic appreciations, as well as the inevitable animality of the great courtesan. The artist was at least as present in her as the——”

The word that gives me pause is one found often enough in the Bible and in current masculine speech of the ruder sort; but it was rather startling in a polite novel. You see, our writers of the sex miscalled gentle mince nothing nowadays; their spades are not only spades, but dirty spades.

The fact that women have chosen rank subjects is no matter; all subjects are food for the great artist. What matters is that they have written inartistically.

Contradictory and incoherent as is the portrait of *Helen* in this book, she remains its dominant figure. She was so sheerly animal, and her passion, made up of perverted sexualism and of revenge, was such an utter abomination, that her share in the book was the measure of the progress made in literary license at the opening of the twentieth century. One could fancy nothing more appealing to the passions of perverted men and women than the two scenes in which *Helen*, so aptly described as “ravishing,” feeds her appetites in the case of her cousin.



She chose, for these occasions, always her garments that shimmered like the sea. Upon these details the author dwells in complete rapture; one finds the like nowhere else in English literature. If that be distinction, Lucas Malet may well claim it. These things had been done brutally, perhaps, in forthright, frank terms that shocked; but never before in loving, lingering phrases likely to corrupt wheresoever they fell. There were two of these scenes in which *Helen* lived up to her "ravishing" quality, in the most active sense. In the first she only approached success; in the second, she tasted it. Observe the first situation:

"*Helen de Vallorbes*, clothed in a flowing, yet clinging silken garment of turquoise, shot with blue purple and shimmering glaucous green . . . knelt upon the tigerskin before the dancing fire. . . ."

Tigerskins and clinging garments,—how our ladies love them. The ladies who play passion on the stage; the ladies who have passion to sell in any form, in print, in play, or in the flesh! How they do love those conventional stage settings! They don't mind how much they repeat what is hackneyed, nor even how much they repeat—one another. For note: five years after Lucas Malet had given us that description begun above, with its "clinging silken garment of turquoise," its "tigerskin before the dancing fire," Elinor Glyn was to write, in a book that, while too fine in its art to be critically reviled, yet reached a vogue that was somewhat absurd, this:

"In front of the fire, stretched at full length, was his tiger—and on him—also at full length—reclined the lady, garbed in some strange clinging garment of heavy purple crepe. . . ."

The fire, the tiger, the "clinging garment"; the picture is reproduced word for word. These two ladies had pictures of passion to paint; they did not wish to disturb us with anything original; they took the acknowl-

edged stock scenery; and painted the same thing in the same way. And what's more, the trick succeeded. I suppose it always will succeed; if you asked any lady of the Elder Profession I am sure you would be told that the trick, no matter how old, how oft repeated, had its definite value in coin of the realm. Some ladies throw in, for good measure, a statue of Phryne; they keep it conspicuous in the room, or in their writing; they sometimes mispronounce it; but who, minded passionately, cares for pronunciation?

Again I would have you join me: "The ladies! God bless 'em!"

And again let us apologise to *Helen*, whom we left kneeling before the dancing fire:

"Her hands grasped the two arms of *Richard's* chair. The loveliness of her person was discovered rather than concealed by these changeful sea-blue draperies. And there, in the arm-chair, sat *Richard*, with his ravisher momentarily closing in upon him. He could feel the honey in her hair, see the dangerous potency of her body."

All would indeed have been sea-blue had not *Richard's* mother come in just then. *Helen* came out of the scene with no little tact, and there was an end of that little temptation.

Later on, *Richard*, soured by other affairs, vowed he'd go to the devil his own way. He bade his home and his mother good-bye, and started for the East, and the shores of Italy. Just like Byron, you see. Alas, poor Byron! One wonders if he, too, was made love to for the sake of the exquisite sensation his deformity might lend the perverted women of his time. But let us not wander from our second, successful, scene of ravishment. It was in Naples, and there was no mother to interfere. *Richard* was, this time, on a couch: you must note the improvement upon the arm-chair. The couch lends itself more fitly to the episode that must now, faintly,

haltingly, be hinted. *Helen* and *Richard* had just dined together. She had already warned him; he was in something of a state of mind; not to mention his body; all his three quarters were fevered by expectation. Then, from the direction of *Helen's* apartments, he heard the whisper of silk. He saw before him *Helen*. In the haste of her bare-footed journey "the fronts of the sea-blue, sea-green dressing-gown she wore had flown apart, thus disclosing, not only her night-dress, but—since this last was fine to the point of transparency—all the secret loveliness of her body and her limbs." This was what she told *Richard*, lying pale and fevered amid the cushions:

"Let what will happen to-morrow, this, very certainly, shall happen to-night—that with you and me Love shall have his own way, speak his own language, be worshiped with the rites he found in the sacrament ordained by himself, and to which all nature is, and has been, obedient since life on earth first began!"

Now no courtesan, of ever so fine a fibre, ever made man such a speech, or ever would, had he legs or no legs, "since life on earth first began." More than that, no woman, courtesan or virgin, ever made such a speech, or ever will. I shall have plenty to say, presently, on the whole detail of what writers have thought fit to palm off as the speech of human beings; but no single speech that can be cited in the whole list of absurd conversations in literature surpasses the one just quoted for utter unreality, for sheer impossibility.

As impossible, as completely foreign to life, as was that speech, so was the entire book. A thousand miles removed from truth, from life, that speech was the measure of the whole book's specious folly. The hundreds of pages showing the trials of *Lady Calmady*, and the manner in which her son, *Richard*, met the misfortunes of his deformity, were all sheer padding. What the author was really after was to write those questionable scenes of abnormal passion just quoted. She saw the sensation she

could make out of these two: a something less than man, and a something other than wholesome woman. A refined courtesan, who ravished a man with two thoughts in her mind; one the exquisitely perverted nature of the passion to be consummated between her and this deformity; the other the revenge she meant to wreak upon him afterwards;—such was the heroine upon whom the best efforts of Lucas Malet were expended in “Sir Richard Calmady.” Those situations were nothing less than abominable. There was never a book less fit for decent minds. The episodes on which the most loving care were bestowed, those episodes which I have tried, as faintly as the decencies of my own page allow, to echo, were utterly and entirely unfit for aught save the columns of the medical journals. And for those columns they were too fantastically untrue to life.

The vital element of life was lacking in the book. All its people were shadows moving in an unhealthy glimmer of passionate perversion. The memories of Lord Byron, the most fantastic stories about him, are a thousand times more valuable than this would-be sensational imitation of the Byronic tragedies. The author’s pet figure, Helen—she of the sea-blue, sea-green draperies, the honey-colored hair, the finesse in abnormal passions—belongs, not to the world where honest men and women move, but in that land beyond the pale where the excesses and ecstasies of Paris and Rome and Alexandria mingle to fill the asylums for the insane. Compared to “Sir Richard Calmady” the “Aphrodite” of Pierre Louys was a chaste and frigid thing. Elaborate as were the Frenchman’s excerpts from the erotic orgies of Alexandria, no picture of his so shocked as did this stuff of Lucas Malet’s; the one was nature naked and unashamed, the other was sophisticated, prurient lechery.

Yet, to prove for what, in our time, we have the ladies to thank, it was necessary to remind you of “Sir Richard Calmady.”

Again, a toast, if you please; you know the formula by now.

In silence, and upstanding!

If you will contrast "Sir Richard Calmady" with W. H. Mallock's "Romance of the Nineteenth Century," you will see how, in comparatively few years, the ladies had left the other sex, to use the jargon of the turf, standing still. Tastes had veered Parisward noticeably in the interim. What was most objectionable in the flood of vileness was the prevalent lack of artistic workmanship, and the hypocrisy with which most of these writers pretended they were teaching moral lessons. Sarah Grand maundered to us of the physiology of childbirth while making believe that she was reading us a lesson in conduct. All this was at a time when both England and America veiled their faces at mention of Oscar Wilde's name. Wilde never went about telling maudlin tales of the morals he wished to point. Mr. Mallock, Edgar Saltus, and Oscar Wilde, of those who adventured upon certain primrose precipices by the highway of fiction, and A. W. Pinero, who went the same course through the drama, had all saving excellencies of style, manner, and taste. Though these writers came surely enough into the class of artists whom R. L. Stevenson declared Daughters of Joy, yet they deserve no such censure as should fall upon those writers, as Frank Danby, and Lucas Malet, whose vulgar versions of the illicit, the obscene, and the concupiscent, tended to so much disgust.

Another lady who proved to us that dear Thackeray's scruples no longer worried her sex was Kate Chopin. The book I have in mind was called "The Awakening." Like many others that may be named in these pages of mine, it is doubtless utterly forgotten; but it would be illogical for me to proclaim that we had a deal to thank the ladies for, if I had not the documents at hand to prove it.

Again this seemed a subject for the physician, not



the novelist. So skilfully and so hardily does the book reveal the growth of animalism in a woman, that we feel as if we were attending a medical lecture. In the old days,—when men, mere men such as Balzac or Flaubert or Gautier, attempted this sort of dissection,—we were wont to sigh, and think what brutes they must be to suppose women made of this poor clay. Surely it was only the males who harbored thoughts fit only for the smoking-room; surely—but, Pouff! Kate Chopin dispelled those dreams; even had they really been possible with Amelie Rives, and “What Dreams May Come,” already in circulation.

“The Awakening” asked us to believe that a young woman who had been several years married, and had borne children, had never, in all that time, been properly “awake.” It would be an arresting question for students of sleep-walking; but one must not venture down that by-path now. Her name was *Edna Pontellier*. She was married to a man who had Creole blood in him; yet the marrying, and the having children, and all the rest of it, had left her still slumbrous, still as innocent of her physical self, as the young girl who graduates in the early summer would have us believe she is. She was almost at the age that Balzac held so dangerous—almost she was the Woman of Thirty—yet she had not properly tasted the apple of knowledge. She had to wait until she met a young man who was not her husband, was destined to tarry until she was under the influence of a Southern moonlight and the whispers of the Gulf and many other passionate things, before there began in her the first faint flushings of desire. So, at any rate, Kate Chopin asked us to believe.

The cynic was forced to observe that simply because a young woman showed interest in a man who was not her husband, especially at a fashionable watering-place, in a month when the blood was hottest, there was no need to argue the aforesaid fair female had lain coldly dormant



all her life. There are women in the world quite as versatile as the butterfly, and a sprouting of the physical to-day need not mean that yesterday was all spiritual.

However, taking Kate Chopin's word for it that *Edna* had been asleep, her awakening was a most champagne-like performance. After she met *Robert Lebrun* the awakening stirred in her, to use a rough simile, after the manner of ferment in new wine. *Robert* would, I fancy, at any Northern summer resort have been sure of a lynching; for, after a trifling encounter with him, *Edna* became utterly unmanageable. She neglected her house; she tried to paint—always a bad sign, that, when women want to paint, or act, or sing, or write!—and the while she painted there was “a subtle current of desire passing through her body, weakening her hold upon the brushes and making her eyes burn.”

Does that not explain to you certain pictures you have seen? Now you know how the artist came to paint them just like that.

All this, mind you, with *Robert* merely a reminiscence. If the mere memory of him made her weak, what must the touch of him have done? Fancy shrinks at so volcanic a scene. Ah, these sudden awakenings of women, of women who prefer the dead husband to the quick, of women who accept the croupier's caresses while waiting for hubby to come up for the week-end, and of women who have been in a trance, though married! Especially the awakenings of women like *Edna*!

We were asked to believe that *Edna* was devoid of coquetry; that she did not know the cheap delights of promiscuous conquests; though sometimes on the street glances from strange eyes lingered in her memory, disturbing her. Well, then those are the women to look out for—those women so easily disturbed by the unfamiliar eye. Those women do not seem to care, once they are awake, so much for the individual as for what he represents. Consider *Edna*. It was *Robert* who awoke

her. But, when he went away, it was another who continued the arousal. Do you think *Edna* cared whether it was *Robert* or *Arobin*? Not a bit. *Arobin's* kiss upon her hand acted on her like a narcotic, causing her to sleep "a languorous sleep, interwoven with vanishing dreams." You see, she was something of a quick-change sleep-artist: first she slept; a look at *Robert* awakened her; *Arobin's* kiss sent her off into dreamland again; a versatile somnambulist, this. Yet she must have been embarrassing; you could never have known just when you had her in a trance or out of it.

How wonderful, how magical those Creole kisses of *Arobin's* must have been, if one of them, upon the hand, could send *Edna* to sleep! What might another sort of kiss have done? One shivers thinking of it; one has uncanny visions of a beautiful young woman all ablaze with passion as with a robe of fire. *Arobin*, however, had no such fears. He continued gaily to awake *Edna*—or to send her to sleep; our author was never clear which was which!—and it was not long before he was allowed to talk to her in a way that pleased her, "appealing to the animalism that stirred impatiently within her." One wonders what he said! It was not long before a kiss was permitted *Arobin*. "She clasped his head, holding his lips to hers. It was the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire."

Ah, these married women, who have never, by some strange chance, had the flaming torch applied, how they do flash out when the right moment comes! This heroine, after that first flaming torch, went to her finish with lightning speed. She took a walk with *Arobin*, and paused, mentally, to notice "the black line of his leg moving in and out so close to her against the yellow shimmer of her gown." She let the young man sit down beside her, let him caress her, and they did not "say good-night until she had become supple to his gentle seductive entreaties."

To think of Kate Chopin, who once contented herself with mild yarns about genteel Creole life—pages almost clean enough to put into the Sunday school library, abreast of Geo. W. Cable's stories—blowing us a hot blast like that! Well, San Francisco, and Paris, and London, and New York had furnished Women Who Did; why not New Orleans?

"The black line of his leg moving in and out. . . ."

Why, even that Japo-German apostle of plaquet-prose, Sadakichi Hartmann, did not surpass this when he wrote in his "*Lady of the Yellow Jonquils*": "She drew her leg, that was nearest to me, with a weavy graceful motion to her body. . . ."

It may seem indelicate, in view of where we left *Edna*, to return to her at once; we must let some little time elapse. Imagine, then, that time elapsed, and *Robert* returned. He did not know that *Arobin* had been taking a hand in *Edna's* awakening. *Robert* had gone away, it seems, because he scrupled to love *Edna*, she being married. But *Edna* had no scruples left; she hastened to intimate to *Robert* that she loved him, that her husband meant nothing to her. Never, by any chance, did she mention *Arobin*. But, dear me, *Arobin*, to a woman like that, had been merely an incident; he merely happened to hold the torch. Now, what in the world do you suppose that *Robert* did? Went away—pouff!—like that! Went away, saying he loved *Edna* too well to—well, to partake of the fire the other youth had lit. Think of it! *Edna* finally awake—completely, fiercely awake—and the man she had waked up for goes away!

Of course, she went and drowned herself. She realised that you can only put out fire with water, if all other chemical engines go away. She realised that the awakening was too great; that she was too aflame; that it was now merely Man, not *Robert* or *Arobin*, that she desired. So she took an infinite dip in the passionate Gulf.

Ah, what a hiss, what a fiery splash, there must have

been in those warm waters of the South! But—what a pity that poor *Pontellier*, *Edna's* husband, never knew that his wife was in a trance all their wedded days, and that he was away at the moment of her awakening! For, other men failing, there are, after all, some things that a husband is useful for, in spite of books like “*The Awakening*,” and that other story of a disillusioned female polygamist, “*Hermia Suydam*.” About the latter story I shall say nothing, since I prefer, later in my book, to consider its author, Gertrude Atherton, in her period of riper judgment and finer art. “*Hermia Suydam*” was an early indiscretion; it had not even as excuse such finished art as Edgar Saltus put into “*Tristram Varick*” and “*Mr. Incoul*”; it may have attracted attention, have aroused discussion; but as a bit of workmanship Mrs. Atherton must often, in later years, have wished that she had never written it. The most you can say for it is that it was a first—no, second—offense.

There was no such excuse for Kate Chopin. She was already distinguished for charming *contes* of Creole life. “*The Awakening*” was a deliberate case of pandering to what seemed the taste of that moment.

While it is the ladies for whom we have so far made way, you are by no means to suppose that we are not to leave them alone if our attention seem to distress them. They had much to say in that period of letters I am trying to ramble in; but they by no means committed all the crimes, or gathered all the laurels. They did not even have to themselves the field of eroticism; there were D’Annunzios and Le Galliennes and Saltuses who kept pace with them there. But there was undeniably a time, beginning with Mona Caird’s inquiry: *Is Marriage a Failure?* when the ladies seemed to dominate the scene. They achieved, at any rate, this: they showed what women could write, and women read, in their efforts to attain those ambitions so loudly acclaimed by our newspapers: the best selling novels.

Disabuse your mind of the notion that my book is to have anything like orderliness in chronology or in logic. You will find plenty of other books, written by serious scholiasts, that will serve your purpose better, if you are looking for a temperate balancing of all the good and evil in our recent American letters. Here is a little ramble up this lane and that; a little roving from one subject to another; a taking you by the elbow and strolling with you into paths forgotten perhaps but still useful; a leisurely companionable enterprise in which, if the mood so orders, you may be asked to listen to personal prejudices and even to personal memories. Yet, however haphazard may seem the links in the chain, in the end you will, I believe, be able to find the chain pulling always one way, toward the emancipation of American literature from the dominance of the dollar.

A critic's soul does not always find its adventures among masterpieces. They are not always great books that will here be used to point certain arguments. Often it is from the most insignificant impetus that a valuable achievement comes. Time and again has a worthless book been useful to the critic who was greater than what he criticised. This is a matter to be gone into at considerable length much later in this book, but it cannot too soon be impressed upon you as one of the Articles in my critical Creed:

The critic is mostly greater than the stuff he works in.

If America had any critics that might be taken as a national compliment. It has, however, unfortunately only newspapers, not critics.

Books you may never have heard of, and authors you may deem insignificant, will appear in these pages. The best-sellers will appear rarely, because they have usually been, from the standpoints of art or argument, only awful examples. While there are some awful examples in my book, especially here at its opening, for the most part



the books and the authors are chosen for discussion in that they made certain impressions on a mind given somewhat to epicureanism; they were what most clearly marked the milestones on the critic's own progress. They gave him sensations and ideas that may, possibly, intrinsically interest you.

Those sensations were often despondent enough. Contemplation of the average literary production led easily enough to the notion that really fine writing and artistic composition were dead among us. Yet always, just as one was at the last gasp of optimism, something turned up to give one breath again. Had one not always counted on this inevitable turn of the tide; had one not kept one's judgment—wrongly called pessimism by the undiscerning—keen for sentencing only so as not to use up one's store of appreciative enthusiasm—one would have tired long ago of spying out the land ahead of the reading public. A confirmed pessimist has no business in the critical office, no more than has the confirmed optimist. The former so wastes his censure that when a really supreme call comes he has nothing out of the usual to offer; the latter makes eulogy so cheap that when honest need for it arrives his praise sounds no louder than when, as is his habit, he merely echoes the advertisements of the publishers.

Even the advertisements of the publishers have long since tired of many of the books that are now serving my purpose; but that shall not prevent my rummaging nosingly in the shot literary rubbish of the yesteryears. It was the chaff no less than the wheat that kept one's enthusiasm alive. Without enthusiasms there would be neither novelists nor critics, neither God nor devil.

Such stories as Beatrice Harraden's "The Fowler," and Kassandra Vivaria's "Via Lucis," are forgotten long ago. Had not the former been echoed, some years later, in E. F. Benson's "Paul," and the latter been such



an obvious effort to translate D'Annunzio into female terms, they would not be worth even this slight mention.

*Theodore Bevan*, in the *Harraden* novel, seduced the minds of all the women he met.

There, surely, our authoress gave us something new, something to thank herself and her sex for. Conceive the spectacle of a weeping maiden pleading for justice, for the punishment of villainy, because: "Your Worship, he seduced my mind!" Conceive the expert testimony that has to be gone into when the crime of mental seduction is once properly on the statutes! In the pages of "*The Fowler*" this hero seduced—mentally, of course—no less than three young women. He took young persons full of the joy of life, appreciating all things, who loved Nature and humanity, and were satisfied even with themselves, and he turned their flowers to ashes, their joy to misery. The persons to whom "*The Fowler*" must have appealed most directly are the professional mesmerists, and Lord Alfred Douglas. Also "*Dodo*" Benson.

If the hero of "*The Fowler*" was an uncanny creature, and one for whose creation we find it hard to forgive Beatrice Harraden, the heroine of "*Via Lucis*" reminds one not a little of that other Creole lady whose awakening Kate Chopin so passionately painted for us. Her name was *Arduina*, and she had "hot white fingers, passionate to the nail-tips." She had burning hair. When *Prospero*, who was an officer in the Italian navy, in command of a torpedo boat, took hold of her hat, she turned pale and cold. This was surely something new. Students of the history of love, as Edgar Saltus in America, and Frank Richardson in England, should take note of this item. A girl with burning hair, and hot white fingers, who turned pale and cold as you picked up her hat, was surely worth noting. When *Prospero* had given back her hat, a tide of rich young blood gurgled round her troubled eyes, and, receding, left her mouth a violent bloody streak and her eyes mere purple blotches. On an-

other occasion, when *Prospero* had told her that he loved her, and had sucked away the sarcasm of her un-kissed lips—which seems a somewhat desperate remedy!—she pressed her lips to his forehead till she panted.

Do you wonder that, after that, *Arduina* went into a convent? She should have been able to teach even *Evelyn Innes* a thing or two.

When she came out from the convent *Prospero* had married another. But he had not forgotten her. Hot white fingers and panting kisses were not so easily forgotten, especially as he was in charge of a torpedo boat and knew the possibilities in explosives. So, when these two came together again, we got this noble scene:

The jerk of him suddenly falling upon her had been more than she could bear. She was not armed for defense. But she knew, she knew too well, what a few seconds more would mean. She tried to free herself.

And he could not let her go. Had he wanted to, the power was gone. With a sort of heaped-up rage he strained her to himself, kissing her, caressing her, calling her all the tender, foolish names he had had three long years to imagine and accumulate—names that he had never called any other woman, not even the one or two who had intensely appealed to him.

"Let me go!" she groaned, the first time his famished lips left hers free to speak. "What are we doing? What are you making me do! Your wife is ill! Think of her! She may be in danger before many hours. And I love her!"

"Leave my wife alone. I love you!"

"I know, I know! You have made me miserable—forever," she panted. "Ah, for God's sake, let me go!"

He was beyond hearing, and soon she was beyond resistance. Her youth's crushed desire had been too keen, and the suffering of it had been too long.

"Ah, dearest, sweetheart! As you will! To be happy once. Kiss me just once again—again—once again—once more."

Her limbs relaxed their tension and yielded, and dragged

him with them in their gradual sinking. Still clasped as in a death-grip, they felt the long, harsh grass, just ripe for hay, meet over their faces.

A vision of two large bright butterflies chasing each other in a love-race across the sky so royally blue, so infinitely free, far above in the white clumps of flowering acacias and the feathery masses of pink peach-blossoms with the wealth of their autumn promise—this was the last image her closed eyes carried with them far into the trance.

Like the breath of a primeval gladness made new again, a warm thrill ran over the breezy field and its blood-red crowd of poppies.

When the warm thrill had run its course over the breezy field *Arduina* was brought back to Rome by a maid. The fact that after the trance and the thrill, that might have enervated the ordinary person, this young woman was able to pick up her portmanteau and sling it into a cab, should prove to you the kind of a hairpin she was.

Yet she was utterly, irremediably tiresome. Her asceticism is as disgusting as her hysteria. When she married *Prospero* she wearied him with too much loving, just as she wearied whoso read of her.

It was simply another case of a young woman determined to undrape her mind. Veiling her book's first part with dissertations on convent life, she found herself at home only in the heat of passion and the lees of sentimentality. She gave a picture of *Prospero*, sickening of *Arduina's* love, that was surely nothing less than repulsive: "*Prospero's* age, character and formerly dissipated—or, at least, independent—habits could not give her back the violent, exacting love of her panting long-restrained twenty-four summers." No, probably not. He was only a torpedo-boat captain, not a pastmaster in Alexandrian revels.

The case of this book's author, *Kassandra Vivaria*, has its value in marking the progress of the writing women.

She was an Italian; she tried to beat Swinburne and D'Annunzio at their own game; she only succeeded in proving that when a woman writes badly she writes a hundred times worse than man at his worst. Her torrid subject, her eccentric English, did not prevent the publishers from supposing that this was the sort of thing the American women—who seem the only Americans who spend money on books—might like to read. So eccentric was her English that she painted “a lean, neurasthenic man with an hallucinated face,” and on another page a man walking with a woman “adapts his face to hers.”

Do you know what a hallucinated face is, or a face that you can adapt to another's? Do you think either of them is really wholesome?

Carelessly as the examples were chosen, they must surely prove that these writing women were able to go to every length to attain their objects of startling the community; they could disclose the inmost secrets of their sex; they were willing to sacrifice everything and anything; they had all the essentials for success, brazen effrontery, shamelessness, fluency—all save the greatest of all, great art.

If you were able to see the ridiculous in all those passionate scenes of which you have just been reminded, if all that energy and ill intention went, with the reader, for worse than nothing, it was because those writers were essentially third-rate artists. The artistic values of reticence, of simplicity, were not in their schemes; they saw the world hectic, awry, distorted, and so their art was a hideous, bungled, absurd thing. It was to be many years before a woman really showed that in English the passion of the sexes could be voiced artistically; not until Victoria Cross wrote “Life's Shop Window” had any woman written anything, on this subject, that was other than art of the poorest and most shoddy. Despite their shamelessness in details, that man's finer sense of shame pre-

vented him from attempting, they never made strong impressions; they lacked the saving salts of style, of taste, and of art. If, for a time, they seemed to dominate the scene, it was because they shrieked the most loudly, and the publishers shrieked for them; it took the public some little time to emerge from that shrieking chorus and find, calmly, that nothing at all had happened save what was not worth remembering.

For bad art is never worth remembering, save as a warning.

### CHAPTER THREE

CURIOUSLY enough the most daring advance in realism of the sort we have been considering in these pages was also the most artistic.

Whatever may have been attempted in those hidden ways of print that properly have no rank in literature, there was still one from which even the most relentless realist, even the most shameless of the shrieking sisterhood had turned. In English, at any rate. Whatever the reason, whether fear of public or publisher, philistine or purist, that subject had been avoided by the most daring. If you bring up the case of those copies of the *Pall Mall Gazette* that went to a premium a few hours after publication, one has to retort simply that those pages did not happen to be literature. Dante Gabriel Rossetti made some delicate hints in this direction, and there was once a time when it looked as if George Moore might turn his coldly artistic eye upon matters horizontal rather than Celtic. Yet to all intents and purposes no modern writer in English dared attempt actual literary chronicle of a fallen woman's life.

In whatever language, the task must be formidable. To lead the reader into completion of the book by the fascination of the earlier chapters, wherein must be described the most despicable of man's inhumanities to woman, is surely no light task. Though we may admit women of the night into our metropolitan life, we bar them from our literature. Except as an adjunct to consumption or a high soprano, we do not reserve any place in art for the daughter of pleasure. In the main, no doubt, this is just as well. The lesser writers would hopelessly brutalise the subject; the greater ones avoid it either from distaste, or from fear of falling beneath the demands of the case.



Besides, in letters as in life, there was always the unfair competition of those members of society who, ostensibly outside the Yoshiwara, yet ply its artifices. As, for instance, those various lady novelists to whom your attention has already been called.

If the thing was to be done at all, in any manner possibly to be classed as artistic, you would have thought the language would be French. In that tongue one would expect the exact finesse, the delicate slighting of the cruelly bestial, the lifting of all beautiful details, that would go to a sum total of really artistic embroidery upon a subject full of ugliness but also full of human suffering. When the thing was finally done, however, it was not in French.

France had given us "Aphrodite." That, in its frank fleshliness, was something the shrieking sisterhood had never, with all their sickly sentimental poses, managed to equal as to its art. There you had the enthusiastic devotee of love; but you had her without any false trappings that included such words as Sin and Society; you had her shown you at a time when Love was indeed, and not merely in a sentimental sermonising, the Greatest Thing in the World. It was a cult. That cult of love was lifted to the dominant places among all cults; questions of morals had no more business in that cult than esthetics to-day have in politics—and the picture Louys gave us was so staged that no touch of the sordid, the brutal or the mercenary even for one instant appeared there. It was French art at its best, proving most directly its descent from the art of the Greeks.

But when this strange thing came to be done it was by a German, and a woman. That her product can be considered as art at all is the miracle. The crass forthrightness of the German mind so often had produced only the dirty. Some of their caricaturists still prove that: their work is comparable only to the grotesque bestialities of such obsolete brute-Britons as Rowlandson. If one had

not been prepared for it by the gradual changes that had been coming over all Teutonic art and letters in this same century-turning period, one would have been profoundly surprised by this book, "The Diary of a Lost Soul." Concerning that change, in which the arts typified by the Yellow Book, Oscar Wilde, and Bernard Shaw in England, by the cabaret, by Verlaine, and all the so-called decadents in France, combined to produce the Ueberebrettelle liaison between Poetry and the Music Hall—you are to learn later on in my book. That such change had been proceeding was apparent to all but the most single-tongued literary observers; in view of such change there was nothing so astounding in this book appearing in Germany. Indeed, after you saw how German art had changed in those twenty years to the point where "Das Tagebuch Einer Verlorenen" was possible, you could accept it and weigh it deliberately as a work of art. You saw then that it typified German art just as "Aphrodite" typified French art. You saw, too, that it was work that you could take sheerly on its own merits, without regard to anything else than its own effect.

"Das Tagebuch Einer Verlorenen" then was a profoundly moving book, epochal, tremendous. Tremendous in its truth, and in the effect it seemed sure to produce. We first read the book in 1905; in the years that have elapsed since then it has reached a sale in six figures; in Germany they do not blazon those facts so noisily as here in America, but when those figures are reached something actual has been achieved; it is not mere press-agent's noise.

Sensational as the book was, it was the sensationalism that is in great tragedy. Into this terrible tragedy—the tragedy of innumerable lives offered up yearly in our modern civilisation, the same civilisation that sends missionaries to China—we are plunged at the very outset of the story. The simplest of all methods, the diary, was used. The simplest, and in this case, the most effective.

The diarist recounts her schoolgirl years. The daughter of an apothecary in a small town, she had inherited, through her father, a bit of bad blood. Once, long ago, there had been a light-lived Frenchwoman who married into the family.

(Here, let us pause just a moment to note that while the other nations now rival the French in flinging off all the fetters that once tried to link ethics with art, in most of those newly emancipated tongues,—in the English and in the German, at any rate—some of the burden of original guilt is still flung back upon fair France. Frank Danby pandered to her British readers by invariably describing her erring heroines as of French extraction; and even the somewhat heavy eccentricities, which that eminent tractarian, Mrs. Humphrey Ward, was for so long in the habit of introducing into her otherwise socially perfect heroes and heroines, were invariably accounted for by French blood or the example of Julie de l'Espinasse.)

Our diarist assures us that the curse of that light-lived Frenchwoman had descended upon poor *Thymian*. The mother a Gallic cocotte, the father was really little better. To put it mildly, he was a devil among the women. His daughter, while still innocent of evil, witnessed a curiously rapid succession of housekeepers, after her mother's death. Then, after many schoolgirl scrapes, left utterly to chance and her own physical promptings, comes a fall from social grace, expulsion into outer darkness, and inevitable consequences. Here followed chapters that made of the book the artistic accomplishment that it assuredly was. As surely as "Life's Show Window" in English, or "Aphrodite" in French, so is "Das Tagebuch Einer Verlorenen" memorable in the tale of the sex stories that in our time have been imbued with art as well as sex. Had not the chapters depicting *Thymian's* mother-love, the agony of her renunciation, of her giving up her nameless child to the care of others, been so fine in handling, so compelling in emotional power, so exquisitely human, the reader could

hardly have kept courage for penetrating into the ghastly, horrid, abominably actual chapters that followed. But the power with which that quite average, sordid fall was painted, and the tenderness with which we were made to realise the mother-heart, compelled us to the abyss that opened beyond.

Step by step we were shown the way into abysmal perdition. Gradually the girl gives way to the fate society had pointed for her. At first, in the upper scale, by the equivocal methods of demi-virgins; eventually in the utter callousness of the public vendors of flesh. The mysterious days and nights in that life compound of champagne and jewels and money are described with appalling suggestion; we see the diarist, in that period, still hesitating on the brink between love and lovelessness; she had not yet reached the point where merely money mattered. The stamp of pseudo-respectability was not yet effaced. Here revealed to us was the life of the protectors, the angels, the gentlemen friends, the papas, and all the other politely mendacious nomenclature that similar circles employ wherever in any part of the world you find both Ways that are Dark and Ways that are too conspicuously White. Jewels, and dress, and money—easily got, easily gone. Fading, gradually but surely, the care for anything but murdering the moment. To make both ends meet, to keep afloat—that was what this human bark was trying for; nothing else.

Throughout, at every crisis, keen intelligence, self-analysis, and appreciation of fate's vagaries, kept awake in *Thymian*; through the most diverse fortunes her diary kept its spirit. On this point, indeed, the author laid great stress. Though this poor girl's body sank constantly lower, her mind was all the time forging higher and higher. She read voraciously; she consumed philosophy, sociology, and all more serious literature. Perhaps, but for the insistence on these qualities in *Thymian*, the recital of her bodily descents into hell might have be-

come too terrible. As it was, we followed her depths as earnestly as we tried to recall her heights. You may aver that so intelligent a girl never could have had such a life; that all this is a bit of trickery, of mere literature; but to make that assertion you would need much hardy ignorance of life. Yet had there been exaggeration, it would have been excusable, so that *Thymian* might still win her place in literature, and, by winning that place, be of some actual service, perhaps, to that despised fraction of humanity which all the other fractions profess to scorn.

The most abject rôle in the book was played, not by the unfortunate heroine, but by her family. It was that family which constantly drove her from one comparatively safe harbor to another. Time and again when she had found shelter of at least a semi-respectability, the family bobbed up, under pretense of caring for her good name, and chivied her out into—utter damnation. Upon the last fatal crisis that drove her definitely upon the way of bodily commerce we are not informed. Here there was a hiatus in the diary. Otherwise the reader wishing the sensational need not complain of any omissions whatever.

It was all there, that life of those wretched ones. The life that reeks of the streets, of the creatures of the streets, of foul language, foul thought, foul living. What need to tell of it more elaborately? Whoso does not live in a cage or a cave knows our modern Babylons well enough to know that if the life of any one of its victims were put down carefully, word for word, day by day, the recital must be terribly tragic, terribly shocking; and that is what this recital of days and nights in Hamburg and Berlin is. Lovers who come and go; whispering creatures of no sex at all who blotted the streets and the cafés; landladies to whom harpies would seem angels of mercy—all these mingled and crossed in the pages of that book.

Unless I translated for you page upon page, chapter after chapter, I could not hope to impress on you the horror of that bald chronicle of a life misnamed as “of



pleasure." Every sort of vice that the police and the alienists wot of had its hint there; amid those ghastly uglinesses, and amid her own life of loveless commerce, we saw the girl *Thymian* still preserving the vigor of her mind, of her clear outlook on life, of her criticisms upon society at large. We saw too the uplifts she occasionally made; the good luck that sometimes came to her from the bad; and the something very like peace and security that came to her before the very last.

In the final count, aside from its value as a work of art, it is as an arraignment of modern society that the book must stand. Had it not been for that side of it, for the constant comments in that sort, and for the appealing force of humanity that informed it all, the book might not have been possible of consideration as literature. It remains big, epochal. It was a bit of real life transferred to writing. Whatever is human—as I remarked in the opening of this book you are now reading—has claim on humanity's consideration; if it be presented by an artist it has rank as literature. In her "*Tagebuch Einer Verlorenen*" Margarethe Boehme proved herself an artist.

As in the play by Bernard Shaw which a New York police commissioner once found unfit for public performance, in this book it is the men behind who were accused; that was why the book went so deep. That, also, was why one did not, reading it, feel the same nausea that the Danbys and the Lucas Malets had aroused. The smug citizens who raked in the rents from Mrs. Warren's little profession, and from the houses of the Widowers, are the same ones who were pilloried in "*The Diary of a Lost Soul*." It may not have been sweet reading for the smug. But for people of clean lives and clean thought it was in many ways a memorable book. It signaled, for those who had not themselves visited Germany during the early years of our young century, the license in life and letters that had come upon a country once thought



immersed in science, philosophy, music and material welfare. The material welfare had produced in Berlin a night-life that no other Occidental capital can rival for brilliance or shamelessness. In literature the dominance of the "Backfisch" was overthrown; the cry of these people was for whatever was the most modern article of the moment. Whence came that article, from France, from Scandinavia, from Ireland or England, mattered not at all. So that it marked an advance, a crossing of moral Rubicons once thought impassable;—nothing else mattered.

Just as Flaubert let the career of *Emma Bovary* exert its effect without adding anything of either glamor or morals, so is "Das Tagebuch Einer Verlorenen" considered as an actual human and literary document, while such pretentious efforts as those I cited before it succeeded only in making for disgust and oblivion.

We had, then, the curious spectacle of the book that marked, as to its subject, the lowest point possible even to the more shameless sex, being also the highest point artistically. The logical sequence had been complete; from describing in terms of fashionable life a number of erotically more or less perverted men and women, our friends the ladies had finally reached description of a harlot's career. That this career should prove artistically and ethically more valuable than the careers of her various unprofessional rivals is one of those ironies that I hope the ladies themselves will take warning from. After that, nothing further was possible. The ladies have now nothing more to reveal. Let there be as many more confessions in the manner of Marie Bashkirtseff as you like; there are no more depths to plumb; the tale of shamelessness has been told to the last word.

As it was in a language other than English that one found the logical conclusion to which the work of our erotically minded women had been pointing, so it was also in a foreign book that the public courtesan was

most poetically painted. This was Louys' "Aphrodite," to which reference has already been made. The book can be included in this present consideration, for the reason that though it is by a man, he is to be ranked as that next thing to a woman, a feminist. Under the feminists one had come to include such writers as Marcel Prevost, who occupied himself exclusively with feminine details, with imitation of women's love-letters, and with analysis of the souls and bodies of a modern type that is half virgin, half courtesan. It is not my intention to consider the feminist writers at any length; but some of the work of D'Annunzio in Italy, of Louys in France, of Le Gallienne in England, and of Edgar Saltus in America, has bearing here. "Aphrodite," at any rate, is useful in contrast to the efforts so many writing women had been making to paint the married and unmarried courtesans in our hypocritical modern society. Written by a skilled and conscientious artist, it made no efforts toward the salacious; it merely described an ancient apotheosis of love, and left that description without comments or arguments. What it should have proved to the writing sisterhood is that they can never hope, in English, to reach that perfection of prose with which Louys painted those unshamed and triumphant courtesans who queened it in a metropolitan life that once was as real as ours.

So, in taking my leave, for the time, of the ladies. I would wish them knowledge of French and German. The literature of the one has already given us the harlot of the streets; the literature of the other has painted, for all time, the harlot of the palace. In English there seems nothing more to be done.

If the ladies think otherwise; if they think they can still surpass what they have already done in the way of sex-stories, their books will have to be printed on asbestos, and critics will have to wear goggles as blue and huge as those of motor-men.

## CHAPTER FOUR

THE feminist work first to be considered, after leaving the ladies, is Louys' "Aphrodite." It marked a height in sensuality the ladies themselves had never been able to reach. It showed that not even the female's greater shamelessness could equal the impress made by the male's greater art.

Since the days and nights of the Paphian Venus the language of ancient Greece has had but one formidable rival in celebration of the charms of the physical. Only out of France have come such utterly carnal versions of life as the frankly pagan periods produced. Nothing in English literature has ever approached the splendid sensualities of Gautier or of Louys. Against these the prose of Walter Pater was as marble to flesh. Beyond mere style and language, moreover, the French mode of thought has been the only one frank enough to apply itself unreservedly to considerations of the utterly undraped.

It has already been pointed out how, in English, the old Gallic enamorment of nakedness, was more and more being voiced, especially by the ladies; and how, artistically, only failure resulted. It was, indubitably, from French sources that the impetus toward sensuousness in English letters came. The art employed by our writers, however, was never great enough to impose the French point of view definitely upon even the most debauched section of our reading public. To what heights of sensuousness that French point of view can rise, it will be interesting to consider; so it is that we come to "Aphrodite," that masterpiece of the most pagan prose the French language can show.

In "Aphrodite" Pierre Louys turned courtesanship

into a poem of a thousand facets, all jeweled and resplendent. He wrote a story that for exquisiteness of detail in describing the intricacies of physical love surpassed all previous chronicles of the sort. "Mademoiselle de Maupin" seemed, in comparison, a nursery tale. Louys sang the most plangent paean of the human body in its nakedness; he swung the incense of almost immaculate prose about the perfect beauty that pagandom found in love of the flesh. He gave us a chronicle of Greek manners which made of mythology a garden of unspeakable flowers and a hotbed of such vices as Anglo-Saxon lands preferred to ignore. He sang the song of utter soullessness, of perfect pre-occupation with the physical. He sang openly, frankly, gladly; not like the English sopranos who had tried that song, furtively, and pretending it a moral hymn.

Even in the subtleties of French those frank revelations, upon page after page of "Aphrodite," startled and almost stunned the non-Gallic or non-Greek mind. So utterly at variance was this picture of Greek morals with the mode of thought prevalent in our puritan cosmos that, at first contemplation of it, one gasped. However strangely fascinating was this gorgeous woof of sensuous colors, its entire shamelessness seemed to any Anglo-Saxon a trifle revolting. At first, at any rate. Under the strange spell of M. Louys, however, it eventually became possible and even pleasant to forget modern conventions and modes of thought, and to see life and love only from the Greek point of view which he so charmingly expounded. Whether such prose in English is possible; whether it would be admirable from moral as well as artistic standpoints; that is another matter, and one with which we need not now deal. In frankly admitting the flesh as well as spirit into the humanities possible for English prose, Mr. Maurice Hewlett has done much; his prose itself, with its happy welding of Tuscan charm and Saxon forthrightness, is admirable and must be remem-

bered in any count of what in our time has been scored by those artists who have thought of Style as well as of success; but he has never ventured openly into those ancient Courts of Love in which M. Louys moved so freely. Perhaps even Hewlett's fascinating prose might have failed if employed continuously on a theme like this.

When first I read "Aphrodite" it certainly seemed to me that these pages could not be shown safely in English, that our language would brutalise the charm from these pictures of splendid vices, and would leave their actuality revolting. Nothing that Mr. Edgar Saltus has since written in his books dealing directly or indirectly with the History of Love has convinced me that I was mistaken. The more I read Mr. Saltus the more I wanted to re-read Louys,—or the documents in the Astor library. If an English version of "Aphrodite" exists, I have been spared perusal of it. How, in English, could one palatably phrase, for instance, such passages as those in which were described the gardens of the goddess Aphrodite-Astarte, where hundreds of girls worshiped naught but love and were taught nothing else? Or the feast in the house of Bacchis, or even the sunset picture of the quay of Alexandria, with its moving crowds of idlers vivifying the pagan life that Louys has painted for us thus:

De groupes se formaient de place en place, entre lesquels erraient les femmes. . . . Les jeunes gens regardaient les philosophes, qui contemplaient les courtisanes. Celles-ci étaient de tout ordre et de tout condition, depuis les plus célèbres, vetues de soies légères at chaussées de cuir d'or, jusqu' aux plus misérables, qui marchaient les pieds nus. Les pauvres n'étaient pas moins belles que les autres, mais moins heureuses seulement et l'attention des sages se fixaient de préférence sur elles dont la grace ne'était pas altérée par l'artifice des ceintures et l'encombrement des bijoux. Comme on était a la veille des Aphrodisies, ces femmes avaient toute license de choisir de vêtement qui leur seyait le mieux, et quelques unes des plus jeunes s'étaient même risquées a n'en



point porter du tout. Mais leur nudité ne choquait personne, car elles ne'eussent pas ainsi exposé tous les détails au soliel, si l'un deux se fut signalé par la moindre défaut qui prêtait aux railleries des femmes mariées.

Sheerly and ornately, with the ornateness of elaborate detail, of brilliant color and sculpturous artifice, "*Aphrodite*" was a study of courtesanship in ancient Alexandria. It had no more plot than a short story might have, but its vocables were more passionate than those of Swinburne, and its shamelessness was such as to make us ashamed of shame itself.

The central figure was *Chrysis*, a beautiful courtesan who left the shores of Galilee at the age of twelve to find love and adventure. Two thousand had been the score of her lovers, yet had she never loved until she met *Demetrios*, whom all women desired, and who was tired of them all, including the queen herself. *Demetrios*, fascinated by the indifference shown by *Chrysis*, promises,—in order to possess her who in seven years had refused herself to none—to commit three crimes. He steals the mirror of *Bacchis*; to obtain a certain ornament he kills the headpriest's wife; and that *Chrysis* may have a string of pearls he desecrates a sacred statue. But when he has done these things—for which others lose their lives and at which the populace thunders—his desire for *Chrysis* passes, in possession of her, as in a dream. When she comes to him in the flesh, it is he that is all marble, she all fire. To gain his caresses she, in turn, vows to do his behest. He orders her to take the three articles he stole for her and show herself publicly in such wise that she is sure to be seized and sent to death. The night before her death he vows he will come to her, will give himself to her. He comes, but he gives her only cold philosophy while she drinks her poison.

That was the main story, but it abounded in such luxurious passages of description, such riotous tints from



passion's vase, that the plot was a mere incident in a beautiful, enchanting, dangerous exposition of the sacredness of physical love, of the beauty of the human body.

My contention, that M. Louys' book reached a point to which not even the hardest of the females or the feminists using English would attain, seems borne out by the fact that the opera of the same name, though successfully given at the Opera Comique in Paris some seven or eight years after the appearance of the book, has never yet been done in English, though its forerunner, Charpentier's "Louise," after eight years of timidity on the part of American managers, was finally given our public.

With music by Camille Erlanger, the dangerously enchanting pictures of Alexandrian life that Louys had invented for us, reached their most memorable potency. Even if one had not read the book, those scenes upon the stage of the Opera Comique, those poses of Mary Garden singing and playing as *Chrysis*, were as memorable as anything the arts have shown us in the last quarter of a century. It was not only while Mary Garden sang and the stage courtesans danced those wonderful dances that made nearly all other dancing pale and poor, that one felt the pertinence of this section of Greek life finding its revival in the Paris of to-day; one could find that pertinence also as one strolled, between the acts, in that glittering foyer. There, after all those thousand years, the mates of *Chrysis* lived and walked again; for nakedness they had exchanged coverings, that was all; and for the frank word courtesan the world had chosen the half-hearted one of demi-mondaine; the person and the purpose were in no iota changed, though for Alexandria we read Paris.

Ironically considered, perhaps the persons who dole out art for American consumption are not to be blamed if they wait a decade or so before they transfer to our side of the Atlantic such essence of Paris as "Louise," or if they prefer not to attempt "Aphrodite" at all. To the

danger of being beforehand, they prefer the odium of seeming slow. For there is no greater tragedy than that of being, in life or in the arts, before one's time. Many a time has that tragedy been mine, and one of those cases I must now try to recall for you, even if in doing so I seem to depart a little from literature, and what has been done by our females and our feminists. That there would be plenty such ramblings afield I warned you earlier in my book; there were to be many moments when literature was to be of interest only as it reminded us of something else, and when the books of others were but to serve to start reminiscences and sensations of my own. This is one of those moments. For its coming the dancing in "Aphrodite" must bear the blame. Those dances, and the dances that even now are still with us; these are what bring up this little lament over the tragedy of telling the world things that it is determined not to hear until a year or so later.

It was in the spring of 1906 that I first heard "Aphrodite" sung, eight years after I had first printed an appreciation of the book in America. Of that same spring of 1906, in Europe, it was the prevalent public worship of Terpsichore that most impressed itself on my memory. It was the dances and the dancers of that season that I tried to proclaim on the American side of the Atlantic; it was not until two years later that the vogue itself reached here; by that time the tragedy of having been too soon was mine once again.

Of other seasons in Europe that had left faint melodies and dim memories I recall still one wherein mingled only the strains of the "Valse Bleu" and "Amoureuse"; another that held the midnight laughter of the cabarets in Berlin and Vienna; and another that echoed interminably the music of Franz Lehar. Of that season of 1906 only the dancing was memorable.

It was the year when the garish sparkle of the Maxixe

spread about the European continent. Under its own name, or many others, such as the Craquette, it was this dance that swung itself upon the eye and the ear. From Spain to Paris, from Paris to London and Berlin, it had rung its countless changes of beauty and danger. The melody that it went to dominated Europe; before this dance, the cake-walk became an obsolescent exercise. Recalling the portrait of Carmencita by which Sargent first clinched his hold upon fame, it seemed not too much to suppose that a great artist might have again found a great subject in the Maxixe. Zuloaga's was the land that sent us the Maxixe; his the brush that might have given us the fire and venom of that rhythm. Though to-day they dance it no longer at Maxim's, though the masqueraders at Prince's in Piccadilly have already found newer diversions, yet of its finest exemplars the most melodious memories can never quite die for me. To me that European season brought nothing more characteristic than the dancing of Liane d'Eve in the Maxixe, and of the dances in "Aphrodite." Between those two was that season in essence.

In the Maxixe could be found the arts of Carmencita, of Otero, and of the old Egyptians. The costume might be of the ultra-modernity of Paris patterned on a mold of Spain; but the motion was that of the primeval female using beauty for beauty's first purpose. Seduction rarely went more lithely to music. The danger in this dance was that, danced by couples, one male and one female, it was easily vulgarised, easily robbed of all its fine innuendo, its voluptuousness left bare and vulgar. When, a year or so later, the dance was brought to Broadway, we were to see, clearly enough, how completely it could be stripped of all save its vulgarity. An artist, as was Liane d'Eve, made it the visible medium for passionate entreaty. For all the melody and color that are in the desire that is also ecstasy. In that swaying of body before body, that exchange of retreat for pursuit, all the

routine of physical passion was made at once beautiful and graphic.

A friend of mine, a German poet, once dated his Introduction to a volume of Chansons thus: "Munich, In the Month of Saharet." That was a good many years ago; often enough, since then, could the Londoner have dated his letters in "The Maud Allan month," or the New Yorker "When Genee Danced." By 1906 Saharet was already an old story, but whoso had not seen the fine portrait of her by Franz von Lenbach, or the many lesser ones by lesser men; or who had not seen the literature and the art of that time, can hardly fancy the hold this Australian dancer had upon artistic Germany. She became, eventually, a Berliner; a staid mother of children, she still danced, still looked eternally young, and still artists scrambled to depict her. In Berlin, that season, not even the Maxixe dimmed her lustre. Nor did it dim the lustre of Isadore Duncan. Forsaking the Gruenewald, where abominable whispers accused her of being not an American—she had used her Americanism as an attraction in Europe—but a native Berliner, she descended again, that year, after long absence, on Munich, where again they repeated their old chorus of appreciation. A couple of years afterwards, her German vogue a little staled, she was to turn to English and American audiences, whom Maud Allan and Adeline Genee had schooled in the art of the dance.

It was the oldest, however, that was, in 1906, the newest dancing. Compound of the dances of Spain, of the cachuca, of zarzuelas, of the stomach-dance, of the dances of the houris in the Asian Orient, the Maxixe expressed to moderns the oldest passion in the world. The dances in "Aphrodite" expressed exactly the same thing in the Greek and Alexandrian syllables. In the staged and melody-filled version of the Louys book we saw the apotheosis of the courtesan, and that apotheosis most essentially expressed in the dances. Though Erlanger's music

was of a monotonous sweetness that served only as orchestral background, never as chief charm, the performances of "Aphrodite" were the only things in Paris that were artistically worth while that year. The girl from Chicago, Mary Garden, was admittedly no longer at the height of her singing prime. That protégée of Sibyl Sanderson, once the pet of all musical Paris; that spend-thrift American beauty whom we were not to hear in New York until several seasons later (and were even then to find worth raving over as singer and actress) was already beginning to pay for having played fast and loose with her voice. Yet to have seen and heard her then was to have stuff for memory.

Against that background of fine orchestration, never lapsing into melodic assertiveness, against that scenic atmosphere of a painting such as Alma Tadema might have painted had he known passion as well as color, those bacchic dances in "Aphrodite" shone incisively. All the hard glitter of the aphrodisiac atmosphere accentuated the beauty of the robes, the simplicities of the head-dress. The Greek robes that clung to every curve of body; the plain bands and fillets that held the hair; all these only seemed to add to the passionate swayings of these dancing courtesans.

Those voluptuousnesses of the flute-players that it was not possible dramatically to reproduce from the book itself were atoned for by the brave beauty in the dances shown us. The oldest profession in the world seemed lifted, for those moments, into something so fine, that it passed utterly beyond the scope of moral reasoning. The courtesans and their life seemed fair at least in æsthetic completeness.

Just as the dances were that season the most memorable items in European art, so one could find them, if one chose, typical of a dominant note, the note of the Triumphant Female, that I have already referred to, and that has been the theme of all these chapters. There



was to be much dancing of other origin; including especially the dances based on Oscar Wilde's "Salome"; but it was the dancing of 1906 I first made a point of publicly proclaiming as the distinctive European feature. Neither our newspapers, our managers nor our public discovered all this until a couple of years afterwards; that was just long enough for my hints to have been forgotten.

Note, then, the moral: wait until the procession moves; never show the way. Unless, that is, you prefer always the forefront of the battle, like to feel its fiercest buffets, and do not mind being left forgotten on the field afterwards. There will be little profit for you; you will increase the score of your enemies; and yet, and yet—well, being in the ruck of the mob in affairs artistic was never to my taste.

Turning from the work of Pierre Louys to that of the other feminists who by their novels deserved inclusion in that somewhat erotic assemblage I am here considering, we find D'Annunzio, who for brutality surpassed even the sex that is his chief subject; Le Gallienne, who was erotic in such mild ladylike posturings as to induce both disgust and laughter; and Edgar Saltus, the only American among these feminists who has deserved well of us by having had care for literary style.

For the sake of the vastness of the contrast, let me come, from Pierre Louys, to Richard Le Gallienne. It is like listening to a female impersonator in the music-hall after you have just heard a robust tenor at the opera.

At a period when our literature seemed to be written, not as Thackeray's idea was, by gentlemen for gentlemen, but by women for women, we have seen how the mere quantity of the salacious stuff that was printed killed any thought of its quality. At that same time, however, our magazine, rather than our book literature, was utterly dominated by the desires and tastes of the American



girl. It was an extraordinary paradox. Books spilled salacity from the women and the womanists; magazines offered pap to those on the verge of womanhood. Discriminating readers were disgusted at the reign of filth on the one hand, and at the namby-pambyness on the other. Here it was the shrieking sisterhood that flung its sex at us; there it was the intelligence of the Young Person—the Matinee Girl, the Backfisch, the American Girl, call her what you will!—that was exclusively catered to, and so inflicted itself on the rest of us. It was this condition of our magazine literature that once stirred Gertrude Atherton to the remark that to succeed in American letters one must needs be a eunuch. She forgot what her own sex had done to prove that nymphomania was the best training for production of a “best seller.”

The gulf between the shamelessness of some of the women and the false shame of the men; between the strong, not to say high, meat in the books, and the Melin’s Food in the magazines, was bridged by the work of Le Gallienne. A certain story about petticoats by this writer can still be remembered pleasantly enough. It had its prettinesses; it showed a delicate, graceful art, and some tender fancy; yet it had in it much that was unhealthy, much that showed its author’s brain overloaded with physical phrases and physical facts. Those unhealthy tendencies increased from year to year until they finally became the features of this author’s work. He took to beating the thinnest of plots still thinner by irritating assumption of mentorship that was merely the method of Thackeray strained through a smaller mind. The air of taking the public into his confidence resulted not only in putting one utterly out of patience with a ridiculous pose, but in destroying any hope of reality there might have been about the stories themselves. It was all like painted and powdered marionettes worked by a clown. And such sweet and naughty persons as those Le Gallienne creatures were! They tried so hard to make

much of souls and of things spiritual, and of the finer sides of love, and succeeded only in advertising the fleshly bias of their author! It was all such mild dilution, such smug yet shamefaced wickedness!

I specially recall one out of the several unhappy young women whom Le Gallienne used as masks for his infatuation with the bodily aspects of love. She was English, and her name was *Isabel*. Her affair with *Theophil* took the record, I think, for speed in affairs of the heart; four minutes was the official time. *Theophil* was a clergyman of vague non-conformity, a passion for Morris wall-paper and the verses of Rossetti; he was engaged to another young person named *Jenny*, but that mattered little to either *Theophil* or *Isabel*. *Isabel* gave lectures, such time as she was not reciting "The Blessed Damozel."

Having stolen away from *Jenny* one day *Theophil* met *Isabel* at a little station in the country, and they took each other's hands and walked for miles and miles without saying a word. It was just as well, you see, that *Isabel* was English; one can't quite see an American girl taking that wordless walk. After having walked the woods those aforesaid miles and miles, I regret to say that *Isabel* permitted herself the indiscretion of lying down on the green earth with him. Blush not, good people! Are you not aware that this sort of thing was Le Gallienne's pet type of near-devilishness? 'They lay down on the green earth—yes; but after that they merely gazed "on each other, hour after hour." Which seems, somehow, to have been an abuse of the green earth. It was just one of this author's nice little ways. He liked to pretend modesty and drag in the fleshly, and to use the symbols of the physical to describe what is innocuous and innocent. When a girl was pure, she was, to him, "all unminted woman." In the matter of the linen *Jenny's* mother had been laying by for the wedding, he made a point of telling us that "at last there is quite a snowdrift of fair linen for *Jenny* and *Theophil* to lie in."

Just about that time *Theophil* was preferring the green earth and *Isabel*; that little touch about the fair linen made the proper artistic contrast. As for the interesting affair on the green earth, we were left in expectancy only for a few moments, in which the author offered some absurd arguments against kissing, and in which, also, the two lovers were supposed to be still only gazing at each other. Presently hunger attacked their silence and their stupidity. They "feasted together, wine and great grapes . . . they called each other silly, beautiful names, and they feigned sad little glad stories, and called the wood their home," and generally behaved themselves like inspired idiots, until "silence should sweep over them again, and a great kiss would leap out of the silence like a flame that lights up heaven from north to south, and they would hang together lost in an anguish of desire." Which, for two people who had lain together on the green earth for gazing purposes only, was doing pretty well. Then they called each other "*Theophil*" and "*wife*," and "a voice that seemed to be neither's and yet seemed to be the voice of both—a voice like a dove smothered in sweetness between their breasts—said 'Let us go deeper into the wood.'"

After that, it was scarcely surprising to find the author referring to the relation between those two as a marriage. What he omitted, however, at the critical moment to observe—and it seems a pity in view of his reference to the flame that lights up heaven from north to south, and also as a basis for comparison with the "warm thrill" that on a similar occasion "ran over the breezy field and its blood-red crowd of poppies,"—was whether the wood, after they had gone deeper into it, moved from east to west, or how.

However, it is not science we expected from Le Gallienne; it was pseudo-passion and pathos spelled with a "b." Of the latter he spilled much on *Jenny*, who still, while *Theophil* was deeper in the wood, fancied him en-

gaged to herself. But *Jenny* came on *Theophil* and *Isabel* one evening as they were locked in an embrace of which the "very attitude was home"—a sort of embrace that may, perhaps, be new to students of home training—and promptly went into a decline. She told *Theophil* what she had seen, and then proceeded to die on his hands. Her death gave Le Gallienne a chance to discuss cremation and the ugliness of worms and many other physical corruptions of the sort he pretends romantic. After *Jenny's* death *Theophil* gloomed a good deal, and had the horrors rather badly, but he was not yet out of the petticoat business safely. No Le Gallienne hero ever did escape the thrall of the feminine this side of death.

The first young person that revived *Theophil's* interest in life was the prima-donna of a Gaiety burlesque. His excuse was really great: he considered her the image of the late lamented *Jenny*! You see how well Le Gallienne had read his Gautier? He gave you an idea from "Mlle. de Maupin" in a Mellin's Food wrapper. *Theophil* went to see the Gaiety person play several nights in succession; he sent his card to her, told her the story of his life, took supper with her, and after that—well, we know how it is with those broiled lobster suppers! "He had leaned his head on a woman's kind shoulder, and she had let him talk and talk about *Jenny*; but her shoulder had been warm . . . and *Theophil* went to sleep that night with the taste of honey upon his lips." That was pretty good for a first interview; if he had seen that actress again one shudders to think what might not have happened. After leaning his head on the actress's breast *Theophil* had, it is true, his moments of remorse. Yet those moments were too slight to stay his dreadful lust for femininity. He rushed up to London to find *Isabel* and resume the episode of going deeper into the wood. But *Isabel* was out, and *Theophil* returned to his pulpit and his parish, until he caught cold and prepared to leave

pulpit, parish and petticoats forever. He sent for *Isabel*, and they took to wine and to great grapes again, with a little poison on the side. Their exodus was quite genteel; there were no bloodstains on the carpet and no letters to relatives or newspapers; yet it reminded one of those pictures in sensational journals under such headlines as "Died in Each Other's Arms."

That, with a benediction in the form of cheap moralising, was the end of the story. The author had pretended the pose that he was introducing Romance in a new form; but his unhealthy phrases are all we remembered. He brought a gasometer prominently into his first chapter, and alluded airily to Verlaine's poetry. But gasometers and the verses of Verlaine cannot kill the peculiar flavor of the Le Gallienne's phrases. An old stonemason's wife is described as having long had her wifehood "submerged in an immeasurable motherhood and the best of cooks." I never knew what that meant, but instinct warned me not to inquire too deeply. *Theophil*, again, had "a passionate intelligence." *Jenny* had in her "bottom drawer" with other "deposits of various kissed objects," "a sweet and rather naughty picture that must never be hung anywhere but in their little sacred bedroom."

Yes, those Le Gallienne books were much like that picture; in little sacred bedrooms they might not have done much harm; but as books they were simply indecent exposures.



## CHAPTER FIVE

IF Richard Le Gallienne was a Liverpudlian, whose prose should have been translated into the masculine before being published, Gabriele d'Annunzio was an Italian who should never have been translated into English at all. The fictions he wrote, like some already alluded to, had no business being criticised by a mere writer; a doctor was the more fit judge. D'Annunzio's variety of mental and physical diseases were enough to appal any mere scholiast; his romances must have been fascinating to medical practitioners. His descriptions of the most intricate moments of functional activity are only equaled by the surgical data in medical journals.

The publishers may have been led to believe that they were filling a longfelt want when they printed his graphic account of the odors that offend, and the nausea that overtakes, women in pregnancy. There was evidently nothing our American reading women would not stand, whatever sex it emanated from, from one of themselves, from a man, or from a Le Gallienne. Artists differ mightily as to what constitutes the True Romance. Le Gallienne had found it in a gasometer. D'Annunzio found it in the saliva that festooned the lips of a sleeping baby.

There are still those who vapor of the wonderful psychology of D'Annunzio. Let us hear no more of that. Of the poetry, or even of that in his prose which leads those who read him in the original to forgive him much else, I say nothing. But when it comes to attributing to him a great psychology, and to make that an excuse for translating into English those stories of his which, stripped of their musical syllables, disclose only the mere



unpleasant things in our *Materia Medica*, I think there should be protest. Judged by his novels, as we read them in English, D'Annunzio differed from most of our time's corrupt *viveurs* only in this particular: he insists on spreading the alpha and omega of his corruption over volumes of both prose and verse, in publicly dotting the I's of his indecencies, and in drawing royalties from experiences that more timid persons expiate through life-long devotion to healing springs.

In one of the many biographies that D'Annunzio issued from time to time in guise of novels, was this description, admirably suited, one is forced to believe, to the author himself:

. . . One of those literary men, affected by the saddest maladies of the mind, a libertine, cruelly curious, hardened by the habit of cold analysis of the warmest and most spontaneous passions of the soul, accustomed to consider every human creature as a subject of purely psychological speculation, incapable of love, incapable of a generous action, of an abnegation, of a sacrifice, hardened in falsehood, enervated by disgust, lascivious, cynical, cowardly. . . .

It was in "The Intruder" that this description occurred. That book was typical of this author; we need consider no other to prove his place in our gallery of sex-mongers. "The Intruder" could have been summed up very briefly; some two or three hundred pages were devoted to descriptions of kindly and decent persons, while over 300 pages told of a disgusting hero's sickening analysis of a corrupt mind and a diseased body. But such brief summing up would hardly do for my case. To make an accusation is not enough; there must be evidence more circumstantial, more internal.

The chief actors in "The Intruder" were *Tullio*, *Juliana*, who was *Tullio's* wife, and *Filippo*, who seduced *Juliana*. Beginning with the lady, we learned that she was as white as her night-dress, wore ash-colored stockings,

used crab-apple blossom perfume, and was given to spasms. For the spasms we must not blame her; any woman with the kind of husband she had, is to be excused even worse than spasms. *Tullio* was one of the choicest flowers of corruption that any ever so depraved a pen has yet painted. He had committed almost all the detailed infractions into which the Seventh Commandment is divisible; and to make matters worse he maundered about himself. He regretted himself for over 300 pages. He spared the public not one iota of detail in recounting the many sessions he had with Messrs. Remorse, Regret & Co., Unlimited.

*Tullio* had a way with the women. In view of the fact that his limbs "had acquired an extraordinary flexibility, a sort of illusory fluidity that prevented him from noticing the obstacle presented by the clothes," this is not to be wondered at. A man of that sort is sure to have attractions for the other sex. Also, he had intestine discords. Intestine discords, I believe, are no longer good form in polite society. But *Tullio* was an Italian, and there, perhaps, divorce and appendicitis have not yet ousted intestine discords. Whatever they are, they must be disagreeable, for *Tullio* was an extremely disagreeable person. No man who could dissect, to the tune of 300 pages, his marital infidelities, his campaign to reconquer his wife's affections, and his murder of the child born to that wife through the one step aside by which she was enabled to deal him as much anguish as he had dealt her in a lifetime of libertinage—no such man could possibly be termed pleasant. To call him the "ideologist, the analyst, the sophist of an epoch of decadence . . . a violent and passionate person conscious of himself, in whom the hypertrophy of certain cerebral centres rendered impossible the co-ordination necessary to the normal state of mind" was simply to waste, with D'Annunzio, a deal of specious phraseology on an utter rotter.

*Tullio* had a way of spending weeks elsewhere, with

other women, and returning home to the consoling thought that his wife was a sister to him. That was, I believe, the first instance in modern fiction, where the being-a-sister-to-him had more of a sting for the woman than for the man. For one woman, *Teresa*, this hero had a particularly "sad passion." When with her he took "such violent plunges into the abyss of indulgence that for many days after he lay in a stupefied state." Yet he was displeased, awaking from one of those trances, to discover that his wife was about to present him with a son as a mark of her temporary affection for another. So deep were the sinks of illogic to which D'Annunzio would drive us. Strindberg in "The Father" did not so spoil his tragic argument.

As for *Filippo*, the gentleman who had done *Tullio* the justice of seducing *Juliana*, it was of him that the paragraph which I quoted as applicable to D'Annunzio was supposedly descriptive. Otherwise details in his case were meagre. In *Tullio's* mind *Filippo* figured as constantly "dripping with perspiration." This quality of his, taken with his having placed horns on *Tullio's* head, naturally made *Tullio* anxious for *Filippo's* welfare. When he found that *Filippo* was suffering from "a progressive paralysis of the medulla oblongata" he had great lightness of heart; and the spectacle of *Filippo* having aphasia and agraphia rejoiced him exceedingly. He was so glad about it all that he went home and killed a baby.

What was there, in such stuff as that, to support the theory of the poetry and the psychology in D'Annunzio? This was merely the old device of using the unpleasant things in medicine and anatomy and giving them a literary guise. Old was the trick when he put into the repentant *Tullio's* mouth the assertion, made to his wife, "You were in my house, while I sought you afar off." That was once again the good old theory, advanced by Theophile Gautier, that many a courtesan had, in men's imagination, done duty for a princess. A truly popular

idea, that, with all these bedroom reporters; Le Gallienne used it; they all used it. Perhaps Gautier took it from the Greeks; no matter; it is Gautier's version of it that was most artistic and most memorable. Certainly D'Annunzio's version was worth only censure. Gautier was a genius in phrase and suggestion; D'Annunzio split the hairs of fleshliness into a horrid woof of decay. There seemed nothing sacred to his mania for analysis. Like this book about "The Intruder" there were many others from his pen; in each of them he made some unpalatable disclosure or other. He was not always content with exhibiting himself in various guises of corruption; he even revealed with utter shamelessness all the innermost secrets of such great souls as had come into his life.

What a passion for phrases may result in we have seen in more than one case. D'Annunzio's passion for phrases of a medical sort made only for the reader's disgust. Le Gallienne's preoccupation with the physical, ladylike though it pretended to be, made all his phrases smell offensively. In the case of Edgar Saltus we had the spectacle of an author drunken with his own phrases.

I hesitate to include Mr. Saltus with those others. Yet, if I do so, it is partly that we may leave the whole subject with as clean a taste in the mind as possible. Though Mr. Saltus put himself long ago with the writers about sex, he always was so fine an artist, so careful of style, that, had the women and the womanists been like him in their artistry, I would have had no such philippic as this to write. He serves, toward those others, as a shining light, as a writer who has always striven to write beautifully,—latterly, alas, too beautifully, as I shall show.

In the eighties Mr. Saltus was of those who spurred the general American interest in sex stories. His "Tristram Varick" and "Mr. Incoul"—I clip something from those titles—were, in their day, sensations. They were fused out of examples from the French and out of Mr.

Saltus' passion for clever phrases. That passion, later, was to threaten his destruction. After the earlier novels he wrote essays, again novels,—some of them somewhat unpleasantly autobiographic—stories that revived the glories of Rome, or gave of Mary of Magdala as vivid an image as Wilde gave of Salome. He gave us a popular and fascinating version of Schopenhauer. The years, in brief, delivered him of some fiction, of a little stately poetry, and of much prose in essay form, in which latter appeared the seed of what is now nothing less than a sacrifice made for style. In the stories of sex so far considered it was the lack of great art, of great style, that left them futile. In the case of Edgar Saltus we had the other extreme; style was too exclusively his preoccupation.

Always addicted to the paradox, to the phrase for phrase's sake, to the sentence that glitters yet is not gold, this author had been gradually letting go the hold he had on logic, upon proportion, and upon the simple enunciation of simple things. By the time he compiled, from the dry and foreign documents in our libraries, his "*Historia Amoris*" and his "*Lords of the Ghostland*," he was become hopelessly mazed by the clamant meaninglessness of his own too brilliant sentences. For some years past his most disinterested friends must often have asked whither this author's piling of phrase upon phrase, heedless of either sense or nonsense, must eventually tend. If we put ourselves upon Mr. Saltus' own plane; if we search the old and jog the new in an equally mad quest for a phrase; if we borrow the jargon of the advocate and the alienist to fit the case of a prosateur intoxicated with the froth of his own exuberance, we may declare that by the time he wrote "*The Lords of the Ghostland*" Mr. Saltus was a dervish dancing in his prose.

We had to go even farther. Perusal of the book paved the way for verbal vertigo in the reader. One found oneself juggling with syllables that meant nothing, though



alliterative, coining phrases that sounded magnificent yet had nothing to do with the case, and propounding the obvious with an impertinent air of discovery.

Just as Mr. Saltus in previous volumes had made palatable various old philosophies and histories, including that of love, so this book, that marked the most tragic point reached by the preciosity of his prose, had vague intention to be a history of the divinities in history and legend. The ancient origins of ancient creeds were marshaled, commented on, and made backgrounds against which Mr. Saltus let off his alliterative and paradoxical fireworks. There was neither beginning nor end to these chapters. That, our author would doubtless assure us, is the test of the most triumphant art. Well, artistic may have been the intent; the result was certainly quite useless. The publisher was shrewd enough to forewarn one that there was "no attempt to be exhaustive or to prove anything." One found that out for oneself soon enough; yet the publisher's admission showed that his conscience was not yet hopelessly seared by the lightning-like flashes of Mr. Saltus's phrases, which, unlike the lightning, were equally without cause or effect. No; assuredly Mr. Saltus was not exhaustive. We were led through a wilderness of names, yet what most impressed us was Mr. Saltus's joy in the many strangely sweet syllables he regaled us with, and the hard glitter he had achieved out of all this posy gathered from other men's flowers. Yes, here was the trick of glitter, there was no doubt of that; but he was assuredly himself the chiefest victim; in the resultant blindness he had lost all sense of proportion—he was blind, hopelessly, utterly blind-drunk with his own brilliance and his own music. We could see him reeling, still spouting phrases, incoherent—wonderful to watch, wonderful to listen to, provided you were willing to pay for simply an exhibition of virtuosity.

If that was what you liked—just a show of rhetorical contortionism—"The Lords of the Ghostland" was the



book for your money. Or, again, if you wanted merely the names of things so that you might do a little vague juggling of your own, to impress the Harlem entourage, or the little Turkish corner in West Philadelphia—just the book for your money! You got a splendid smattering of names of gods and creeds, you were enabled to fling broadcast such allusions and hints as made the Rubaiyat seem a somewhat vulgar and topical ditty. But if you really wished to know the why and wherefore, if you wanted to pass beyond the portals of the temple, you had to leave Mr. Saltus, still babbling, musically, ceaselessly, enchantingly, but—babbling—at the gate. He stood there, reeling and babbling, the slave of his own syllables.

That book was the final confession of his defeat by the defects of his virtuosity. What he had once done eloquently and admirably in his "Philosophy of Disenchantment" and his "Anatomy of Negation" he attempted again; as he had once given us popular and fascinating versions of Schopenhauer and other philosophers, so now he thought to give us an equally successful version of what legend or history have dryly told us of those things that men and gods believed when yet the world was warm in youth. Instead he had given us but sound and fury, and left us only the vision of himself, like to the Semiramis of Edwin Markham, babbling "on an ancient road of Hell." We thought of him only, to change those lines a little, as

"Babbling all night, and when his voice was dead  
His weary lips beat on without a sound."

Perhaps, however, we wrong Mr. Saltus, in supposing that a simple enunciation of things simple, or even abstruse, still appealed to him. His interpretation of the fine old Art-for-Art's-sake principle had perhaps brought him to a point where simplicity and logic seemed equally absurd to him. Well, taking that point of view, we had to admit that, if art was a something intangible, unin-

telligible, and purposeless, Mr. Saltus had written one of the most artistic books ever produced in America. Nearly all our other writers suffered from too little art; Mr. Saltus suffered from too much of it. This book of his achieved no purpose; it was without either time, space or dimension. It swung you high upon a wondrous volume of sound, and —left you suspended there in the upper ether, to perish of intellectual inanition.

A history of the ideal, the sub-title told us, was what our author had conceived. It was a history of nothing save his own pathologic and phraseologic condition. His chapters on Brahma, Ormuzd, Ammon-Ra, Bel-Marduk, Jehovah, Zeus, Jupiter and The Ne Plus Ultra revealed only the diligence with which Mr. Saltus had searched the libraries, so that out of their most sibilant and trumpeting names he could concoct a medium through which to display his own virtuosity. Not one single chapter in the book could we read and assimilate a definite idea, nor yet the outline of a single spent ideal. We gathered only the pungent perfume of the incense Mr. Saltus swung unceasingly before himself, the God of Phrases. If, for a vestige of a second, he fancied himself becoming lucid, he forthwith smashed all chance of that with some climacteric clause so parabolic as to be the utterest nonsense.

What, one wonders, may a "somnambulist of history" be? Mr. Saltus constantly referred to such a person. Was he of the Froissart or Froude school, Boccaccio or Boswell? "Somnambulist of history?" Had not Mr. Saltus, in that phrase, with unconscious irony hit off his own method of walking through the paths blazed by other historians? Referring to legends used by Richard Wagner, Mr. Saltus wrote:

Transformed by ages and by man, yet lifted at last from their secular slumber, the Persian myths achieved there their Occidental apotheosis, and, it may be, on steps of song, mounted to the ideal where Zeevan Akerene muses.

That was a typical sentence. At one stage of it our author saw that fearsome thing, simplicity, confronting him, and therewith lucidity, and the danger of having uttered something intelligible. So he desperately flung the closing phrases at his sentence, dabbed on a spectacular bit of nomenclature, looked at his handiwork and knew it was good; he had successfully fogged the issue with some sounding syllables.

As a "story of beautiful illusions" Mr. Saltus's protagonists presented the book. It robbed one, instead, of the illusion that Mr. Saltus might still be saved from the fate of being a prestidigitateur of prose.

Yet style, though it may claim a victim here and there, is still the saving salt of letters, the lack of which is so conspicuously our American defect. If those writers about sex had known what style was, they had never written stuff which, as you have seen, made only for ridicule. Style is far more than a mere manner of saying things; it includes selection of the things to say; the sense of form is as much a part of style as is the sense of rhythm. Our writers about sex, as our writers about society, rarely had so much of style as, in any international judgment, would award them even the "honorable mention" accorded minor artists. In the period when the novels we thought sensational concerned themselves exclusively with sex, art was ever inconspicuous behind absurdity; I have tried to prove that by several examples. It was the same when stories about Society engaged our attention; as you shall see later. In the more serious domain of criticism, of what used to be called *belles lettres*, our American achievements—as you shall also see—have been so slight as to be hardly considerable. When we were still on England's literary leash we let England provide our "best sellers"; when we began to flood the markets with our own productions we overlooked the quality that might have given those productions rank as literature: style. I

have not here tried to point out all the defects in all the "best sellers" of the last two decades; that would have been too hideous and interminable a task; I have merely chosen salient examples of certain paramount tendencies. How our books reeked with nastiness while our magazines pretended puritanism, I have already pointed out. That our novelists portraying American Society are hardly out of leading strings yet, is to be pointed out later. That our one great writer is, as far as the general literary acceptance of our continent goes, virtually unheard of, I shall also show. Finally, also, some reasons will be assigned; reasons other than our lack of style.

Meanwhile, since Mr. Saltus has brought us so far, let us, leaving for a time the ladies and the ladies-men, consider style a little.

## CHAPTER SIX.

STYLE, to the artist in life and in literature, is at once a window and a mask.

To appreciate the value of masks we need be concerned ever so slightly with all that makes for beautiful in life and in letters. The mask, properly applied, may be a symbol of the soul. Just as the dandy may express himself by means of costume, so can the hidden spirit, too long cloaked by the mobile ugliness of the human face, display itself at last in an appropriate mask. How absurd are some of the assimilations of Nature! Here we find a burglar with the face of a divine; here a madonna with the visage of a vixen. The anarchist has often the look of the conventionalised clergyman; and the poet appears, by a dreadful irony, in the visual image of a banker. Only on the stage is any effort made to restrict the vagaries and paradox of nature. There the villain has his proper label; to confuse him with the hero you must have been brought up exclusively on a diet of nature's personages. From the true artistic mean, however, the theatre's mummeries stray as far as does nature. Only in the popular masking at time of carnival in Latin towns are proper revelations of the human soul possible. Yet, in point of taste, our Louisiana metropolis still has far to go. I remember that Venice, one carnival, put on the characters and colors of Balzac's "Human Comedy." New Orleans, in the first year of the twentieth century, took inspiration for its pageant from Marie Corelli's "Ardath." The gulfs of taste that lie between those two masquerades would take a book to bridge.

If masks might serve a purpose in actual ugly human life, how much more might they not improve our literature! In that part of our literature called fiction, which



has almost wiped out the other provinces, we find as monotonous an ugliness as you may see whenever you note critically the countenance of any human mob. Our tremendous output of novels is equaled only by its barrenness in all that makes for distinction. The printing-presses flood us with books; the flood is as muddy as a spring freshet on the Mississippi; there is a vast bustle of writing and reading; and the artistic total is hardly visible.

We are deluged with facts; fancy is to seek. Our novels of the day are written exactly in the language of the Man in the Street; that is the secret of our artistic failure. It is all on the plane of the average intellect. If you remind me that I began my book declaring that it is the average intellect we must not lose sight of, I reply that while we may give him the life he knows, the characters he moves among, one need not use his own haphazard language. Nor need one leave him to wallow forever in his half-culture. Literary style does not preclude the human interest; keeping in mind the Man in the Street one still should hope to lift his taste wherever possible.

Books written in language that every Tom, Dick and Harry is capable of, add nothing to our artistic advancement. Truth to nature, and near appeal to the general human heart, will not save a book that is keyed down to the vulgar tongue. No such book, even if it survive, can ever be said to have enriched the art of writing, to have brought a nation nearer to an ideal. One can deny our age nothing of vigor, of fecundity. The eye tires in observing the speed with which books appear and disappear; all this mass of printed matter is quite expressionless, there is no style in any of it; it is written so that all may understand, and none of it is worth understanding. Not in a dozen of the popular American novels of the period can you show me a genuine sense of style.

Mere decency demands that a mask be put on this appalling exposition of our average culture. It is not the survival of the fittest, but the survival of the average that we should dread. Our age is terribly oppressed by an extension of average culture; a culture that is to real culture what the demi-monde is to the proper world. Extension of an average culture means arrested intellectual development. The rabid Philistine was not nearly so dangerous to art as the indiscriminating young woman whom the pictures of C. D. Gibson and his imitators bred in horrid profusion throughout the land. Whether it was Gibson one year, or Wallace Morgan another; the speed with which our land began to teem with young women patterned exactly on the models of those artists in black-and-white, proved once again the truth of Wilde's saying that Nature copies Art. Wilde probably took that from Goethe's *Conversations with Eckermann*; but—these endless chains of human thought are rarely profitable. Those "girls" proved, too, how essentially imitative is the average of taste in America; never was there a land so rich in beautiful women, and so poor in originality of adornment; year after year our women—the richest in opportunities in all the world—look as if they were poured out of one and the same mold. In the art of being beautiful, as in literature, it is style we lack.

Those young women, without style about themselves, intellectually mere echoes, typified the average attitude toward letters. They called each "popular" novel, "perfectly elegant," and talked of it as familiarly as if it were a grandmother. The fact that most of the successful books were written in language that called for no thought in the reader, appealed strongly to these heedless persons. Protesting they were "so fond of books and reading" they debased the true coin of our letters measurably.

The disciples of realism will protest that it is necessary to hold the mirror up to nature; it is a pet phrase

of theirs. But realism is a mirror that reminds us how ugly we are, and only the fewest of us are so vain as to need that reminder. Masks, style, give us opportunities to reveal the beauties nature has conspired to hide. The true artist must masquerade. This masquerade has not always been called so; preciosity has been the more usual term. Preciosity! One sees the clumsy weapons of the average American reviewer coming out at sight and thought of that word. Preciosity, they will tell you, and have always been avid to tell wherever there were listeners, is the bane of vitality and vigor. Have these persons never seen the gardeners clipping their hedges in spring-time? There is such a thing as too rank a vigor, too great a danger of weeds choking the proper crop. The pruning-knife of preciosity should be applied to our literature. Our language is not so rich that it will not benefit by weeding. Preciosity is the artist's fairest mask; it is the complete expression of himself. He ceases to be merely a mouthpiece of and for the common intelligence.

Preciosity, in the past, has had its ups and downs; invariably it has been the successor to, and savior of, periods of universal half-culture. Often enough the superficial affectations of preciosity have been fit for ridicule; yet Moliere's satire was no more pertinent than would be a similar reflection on the absurd little *precieuses* whom but now I mentioned as calling all literature "perfectly elegant." Preciosity has never been ridiculous save where it has been that of the under-educated or the provincial. The precious, however odious they may seem to the indolent eyes of such as are content with an easy mean of intelligence, stand for invention, for individuality, and for non-conformity. What is extravagant in preciosity will not survive; what is pedantic will disappear in the maw of the culture-devouring provincial, and thereby lose whatever of singular value it had. There remain but the fanciful and aristocratic qualities. Affectations though they may seem, these are the things in

preciosity that must lift our American literature from its mobbish average. Preciosity may push into the arena, now crowded with all that is common and commonly expressed, a stylist. That stylist might outlive some of his contemporaries.

The public should be weaned from the fetish of mere noise and numbers. Novels are exactly on the plane of newspapers; not only is their circulation advertised similarly; their language is quite the same. Only an alert ear for the vulgar taste and the vulgar speech is necessary to write one of our popular novels. Most of these novelists write alike. The artist ever tries to write differently. If fate has given him a visible and audible cloak which makes him akin to all average humanity, he does what he can to correct the fault; he puts up the mask. The prose in our newspapers proves the horrid average in our thought and expression; they are all written in the same unlovely language. Where is the personal style of a Greeley, a Raymond, a Prentice, a Pixley, or a Bierce? Journalism is content with the easy and common phrase. Preciosity exhausts the nuances of our vocabulary. The normal, as a national attribute, degenerates into the immobile. Revolutionists more often push forward, not over, the Scheme of Things. The revolutionists in our case must be artists in preciosity.

Rather than descend to the vulgar level of our prevailing literary expression, the true artist should take to the digging of ditches. These, at least, he can dig—and, indeed, is comically likely to!—with quite an individual style. To ask a really fine artist to descend to the monotone of our average literature, is as if a euphuist, a person of refinement and sense of beauty, were to eschew his proper speech and jabber creole with the Creoles, cracker with the Crackers, and New England with the Down Easters. Originally euphuism was but exuberance in a newly realised sense of our tongue's richness. Euphuism and reticence are the parts of preciosity we most

need. Both are artistic masks. Shakespeare is the great euphuist of all time. The tropic splendor with which euphuism embroiders language is as a painted, chromatic mask; the sombre tints of our average tongue need this, just as our half-culture with its excursions into the pedantic and the polysyllabic needs the restraint of reticence.

Walter Pater, it has been contended, was not strictly a disciple of preciosity. For my part I think him the most perfect master of that art in our tongue; both his euphuism and his reticence are admirable. Mere affectation is not necessarily a quality of preciosity; it is an attribute that preciosity's enemies conspire to force into it. Pedantry and profusion are both to be avoided; I interpret preciosity more narrowly. It has, for me, reticence, music and simplicity. Behind it is a conscience that feels the pull of the ideal; a sense of responsibility toward the language; and aversion to cheapening, for the mob's entertainment, all one's finest views of life. Bliss Carman, who arranged the fabled phrase of Commodore Vanderbilt to the tune of ". . . and let the Age be damned!" once admitted to me that, were he able, he would write in another language. That was his somewhat excessive expression against the odiousness of pen-and-ink as it has become the medium of half-culture.

The amateur of letters who can find an ounce of style in any random dozen of current American novels is either much to be congratulated or much to be pitied. To quantity, to story, to realism, we have sacrificed everything. Style was nowhere. The nearer a novelist wrote to the average tongue, the more and the louder were the epithets flung at him by the professional flatterers who represented American criticism at its average. As a result, our writing is as commonplace as the conversations in the Subway. Excepting Saltus, the only approaches to style were made by such men as Pater, Hewlett, Henry Harland and Henry James, out of all who gained gen-



eral recognition. Not one of those mentioned is strictly an American. The very fact that Mr. James, himself once an American, is nowadays assiduously imitated by another American, not of his own sex, is only proof of my contention that originality of style in America has been choked by the riotous growth of writing down to the public, instead of up to the art of literature. These steps in imitation would be amusing if they were not so saddening; when James went abroad to study Turgenieff (as we may recall from the old George Moore jibe) Howells stayed at home and studied James; now it is Edith Wharton who is more Jacobite than James himself.

Asked to name an American stylist one could certainly name no popular novelist. Style is not everything; one pretends nothing so absurd. But a corrective for the opulent banality of our written English becomes annually more imperative. Into the vastitude of our half-culture there must come, if we are to rise from our too great democracy of taste, a refinement and sharpening of appreciation that only a touch of preciousity can bring. To resent preciousity *because* it is preciousity is as illogical as to say that the bald must never wear wigs. Our literature grows diffuse and ugly; the recklessness with which it dissipates its magnificent opportunities has seamed and scarred its countenance; the hard, stale, vulgar look which all commonness breeds is deeply stamped upon it. There is crying need for the masks of preciousity, of style.

Only in the splendid reticence, the majestic selectiveness of style, may American literature gather force for a work of art or two to outlive all our present generation of popular novels.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

IF the subject of style led us away from the ladies a little, that was, in view of their general lack of it, not so easily avoidable. Both in their attire and in their literary art, our ladies were never distinguished for overmuch individuality or originality. In logic, then, we return to the ladies after we have paid our adieux to style.

In the period over which my critical activities have brought me, the features most worth attention were the novels of sex and the novels of manners. What share the ladies had in letting the reading public into such secrets of sex as no man had cared to reveal, we have already seen. In considering stories about manners, it is only fair to give all possible attention to the ladies' share. Under novels of manners you are to understand what people have been wont to call historical novels, novels of international marriage, and novels dealing with human society in the large rather than in the *Almanach de Gotha* sense.

One can hardly conceive of any single aspect of our Anglo-Saxon society that the novelists, male and female, have not by now told us about. If quantity had anything to do with it, it would be easy for the twenty-first century to see our manners and habits by simply reading our novels. Yet the fact remains that until John Galsworthy began to write, the real character of English thought under Edward VII had never been recorded accurately; and that about American society we have nothing but very vague and transient impressions of certain temporary and formative periods. After the novels of Edgar Fawcett, describing certain stages in New York's social life, there came nothing at all that was worth mem-

ory until, at this present writing, a number of promising young men show signs of seeing the magnitude of the subject. Young men, hereafter to be considered at greater length, as: Winston Churchill, David Graham Phillips and Robert Chambers.

If quantity, to say it again, could have done it, the social historian of the future would have had plenty of documents to go by. The ladies contributed largely to this quantity; so largely that for my present purpose I must choose examples very warily, lest there be room in my book for nothing else. Again I would warn my reader that nothing of the godlike and academic is to be expected; you will find only a set of fleeting impressions. Upon my personality and my prejudices certain books, in every domain of letters, made certain impressions that formed, eventually, my opinion of our literature at large. Some of those impressions, with all their qualities of personality and prejudice, you are to have repeated here.

The fiction about society written by women that seems to me noteworthy was of many diverse trends. There were the social tracts of Mrs. Humphry Ward; the pseudo-romances of Marie Corelli; and the international stories of John Oliver Hobbes and Gertrude Atherton. If we consider these, we should be both instructed and entertained. It has ever been one of my critical tenets that if you cannot entertain the public, to attempt instructing it is madness. My pages can be read seriously enough; this, as so much else, is all "in the eye of the beholder"; but when they cease to entertain you have only to say so, and I shall know that I have outlived my usefulness. The philosopher and the fool are equals when the clock strikes.

Let us begin with Mrs. Humphry Ward.

In an age of women novelists, Mrs. Ward was very generally held one of the novel's foremost protagonists. Yet that was not my notion of the novel; what she wrote

were simply tracts; she represented the Salvation Army in fiction.

Once a tractarian, always a tractarian. Only the texts changed; never the tractarian manner.

When Mr. Gladstone was still alive and allowed to spread his tastelessness in English literature, the tracts of Mrs. Ward concerned themselves with religion. She spelled orthodoxy for us with such infinite pains that all the artistic nations of Europe wept over the dulness she had added to British life. "Robert Elsmere" is as dead now as the soap that was given away with it; but the ball of bourgeois tractarianism that it set in motion spun on through England and America until quite recent years. The human soul struggling between a convent and worldliness attracted the art of a George Moore and a John Oliver Hobbes, for instance; but those writers occasionally produced a novel. Mrs. Ward always wrote tracts.

Eventually Mrs. Ward deserted theology, and engaged in social tractarianism. It was still orthodoxy versus heterodoxy, but her subject was society; she remained the disputant and the dogmatist—in a word, the truly British tractarian. That she was skilful in her chosen field we cannot deny. And never more skilful than in the tract she called "The Marriage of William Ashe."

In that book she painted the pageant of orthodox British aristocracy with a vigor that marked her as one of the most successful of those writers who live by preaching from the platform of the social insider. She wrote always as the insider, describing the delectable inner circles, firstly, for the self-satisfaction of the other insiders; secondly, and perhaps chiefly, for the arousal of ambition, envy and imitation among the outsiders. Above all, there was never any dangerously new point of view; never a glint of the comic side to all that life as John Galsworthy has more recently disclosed; never anything but reverent discussion of the orthodoxy or heterodoxy in a social system that the reader was expected to con-

sider, with all its faults, as the finest and firmest in the world.

The skill with which Mrs. Ward displayed what passes for upper-class British life constituted the major part of her appeal to Americans. Mrs. Wharton eventually copied the trick; having copied also the style of Henry James, she persuaded Americans that she wrote about American society, not only as one having authority, but as an artist in prose. We are somewhat easily persuaded in matters of this sort; our so-called critics only increase our willingness to be humbugged. We imagined we were reading novels when Mrs. Ward was handing us her little tracts on the social life. What finally deceived us was the glamour with which she swung before our democratic eyes the traditionally aristocratic British life.

In "The Marriage of William Ashe" we were as constantly breathing the air of English tradition and as constantly surrounded by great personages as in the novels of Marie Corelli we were forever in the company of persons "famous throughout Europe." Mrs. Ward was rather more deliberately a gentlewoman, dealing more obviously in orthodox originals, rather than in paste imitations; but the object was quite the same. Juggle the phrases as you like—say *Insiders* and *Outsiders*, say *snobs* and *swells*—the object of such stories as these was the same; it was to befog the proletarian mind and the snob mind with a sense of the magnificence of the English aristocratic tradition. In "Lady Rose's Daughter," for instance, if there was any story at all, it was one that had already been told several times; its pretended plot was lifted bodily from a French classic; in its essentials it was simply a tract on social orthodoxy and its opposite.

The English tradition, in things fashionable, was time and again painted for us so splendidly that we might be the more poignantly touched by the opposing forces supposed to be making for its decay. Picture followed pic-



ture, each calculated to ensnare the unthinking, the outsider, the snob, and the American—terms in a great many cases interchangeable. By such touches as a picture of a costume ball at an historic house, peopled with a motley and magnificent crowd, Mrs. Ward furthered the efficacy of her social tracts. It was as if she were a fashionable prophet, hymning the glories of the social kingdom of heaven. Always, in her fine crowds, were aristocratic and important personages. Here a famous lawyer stood among the motley, clad in the Lord Chancellor's garb of a great ancestor; here an ex-Viceroy of Ireland, with a son in the government, was magnificent in an Elizabethan dress, showing a jewel given to the founder of the house by Elizabeth's own hand; next to him was a white-haired judge in the robes of Lord Gascoigne. All, we were told, showed in their gay complacent looks a clear revival of that former masculine delight in splendid clothes which came so strangely to an end on the ruins of which Napoleon stood. It was the gay complacency, always, of aristocracy, of the tradition that goes daily and complacently into the rich past.

Yes, for all of Mrs. Ward, that complacency might have continued to humbug the world at large; not until "The Country House" was written were readers asked to note the comedy and tragedy hidden under that complacency and unsuspected by the complacent islanders themselves.

Aristocracy, always aristocracy, was the refrain in these tracts; an aristocracy capable of sheer delight in its own splendor, wealth and good looks. Though English aristocracy might not have a certain dignity to be found in Latin lands, Mrs. Ward assured us that it had more personal beauty and more romance. In her motley and magnificent assemblages did she not present Stanleys, Howards, Percys, Villierses, Butlers, Osbornes, and many other notable family flowers of England, all touched with history, and romance, and tradition? What Amer-

ican reader, wrapped in the rosy ambitions stirred by those glowing pageants, could have resisted their allurements? Lived there the American snob with soul so dead, who never to himself had said, this is my own, my native England? Mrs. Burton Harrison may have pretended irony when she wrote her "Anglomaniacs"; but in effect her story helped rather than hindered the imitative tendencies in our American society.

Those imitative tendencies were never played on more shrewdly than by Mrs. Humphry Ward. What, against the pages on pages of aristocratic pageantry she offered, were those slight ironic touches in which she exposed another side to the English tradition as in "Diana Malbery"? She presented one of even her lesser creatures, pretending to deplore their smallness, as "possessing that narrow but serviceable fund of human experience which the English landowner, while our English tradition subsists, can hardly escape if he will; he had acquired by mere living that for which his intellectual betters had often envied him—a certain shrewdness, certain instinct, as to both men and affairs, which were often of more service to him than finer brains to other people." Think of the appeal of that insistence on the landowner tradition, in a country where the landowner is only just beginning his first taste of an aristocratic ether! Could one wonder at the American popularity of Mrs. Ward? The happy dream of a tradition based on mere being, on just living, just having happened: a Howard, a Percy, a Villiers,—how deftly she sketched that dream so that those worshipping beyond the social Paradise may wish to enter! Entrance cost but little—to a lively imagination—only the price of one of Mrs. Ward's social tracts.

England and the traditional English life—they ran like texts through these tracts. "All that they implied of custom and inheritance, of strength and narrowness, of cramping prejudice and stubborn force" was, we read, very familiar, and, on the whole, very congenial, to one

of Mrs. Ward's characters. If that aforesaid tradition, and the whole aristocratic atmosphere of it, did not become both familiar and congenial to her readers, it was not the author's fault. She kept the pedal down on all such passages; her plots had no other text. Just the English tradition, and its opposite. She took one type formed by this tradition, and compared it to its violent opposite. She played British prejudice, narrowness and hypocrisy against French frankness and diablerie.

She opposed the gaities of Offenbach to the hymns of Dr. Watts.

If she painted a hero with his tolerance as a "sport" away from the English tradition, it was only that we might see the tradition itself more clearly. Through several pretended heroines, representing social heterodoxy, she repeated a certain semi-Gallic type that enabled her to throw into contrast the beauty of the English orthodox life. Time and again she used the same set of puppets, and even the same scenery; she rarely omitted, for example, the fashionable London "salon," where calm tradition opposed tempestuous anarchy.

Though no glimmer of humor ever showed in the writings of Mrs. Humphry Ward, in the writer herself there must surely be something of the comic spirit. No woman who so deftly played upon the social aspirations of a great middle class and a great democracy can be thought capable of suppressing a secret smile.

Nothing in science or the arts, of all that came down to us from the end of the Victorian age, was more amazing than the fiction of Marie Corelli. That a vast army of readers looked to her novels for their entertainment and their opinions about society, it is useless to deny. The Eternal Mediocre is as potent as the Eternal Feminine. Marie Corelli was the genius of eternal mediocrity.

What was Marie Corelli, if not a genius?

She was reported the favorite novelist of Queen Vic-

toria; the multitude declared her a great writer; the ordinary laws of life or logic or grammar were ignored by her; so she cannot have been anything other than a genius. It takes genius, surely, as the late Mr. Barnum remarked in other words, profitably to play the genius; just as we lately concluded that Mrs. Ward must have had humor to play her little tractarian game with us.

We may put ourselves on as arrogant a plane of analysis as we like, we must admit that there were periods when our literary circus would have become extremely tiresome if the performances of Marie Corelli had been taken out of it. She aired her notions—never by any chance anything resembling the truth—about society in England and Europe, as gaily as if she really knew about that society any more than she knew of syntax. The critics might sneer; still the countless army of the indiscriminate read her with unabated and unashamed zeal, and had for retort against censure simply the assertion that the novels of Corelli were “perfectly elegant.”

The more calmly one considered the materials in which this writer worked, the more was one forced to confess that her skill in gauging the middle-class intellect was remarkable. She knew that they wanted the method of the most reckless journalism applied to fiction; she knew that there must be sensation, aristocratic atmosphere, and again sensation. You could observe Miss Corelli depicting impossible peers with one hand, as it were, and pretending an almost anarchistic scorn for all society with the other. Our chambermaids did not care whether peers were served to them with wine or with vinegar, so only they were served to them. Queen Victoria's favorite—if rumor wronged that august female in this regard one cannot too humbly apologise!—knew perfectly that her vast audience of chambermaid intellects would read her lampooning of society with huge delight, because it has ever pleased the chambermaid mind to hear criticisms of that which fills it with envy. Once you have succeeded in

appealing to the intellect of the chambermaid, you are sure of a champagne income.

What did it matter if she wrote badly? To be able to write badly with such an impassioned air amounted to a distinction. She could write badly with more zest than any other person of her time. The very quantity of steam she had up, the tireless iteration of commonplace after commonplace, all uttered with the air of profound originality and the fire of invention, bred in the observer a sort of admiration. She puffed and blew, tattered and tore, so melodramatically, that the onlooker could hardly help being impressed—with appreciation of her energy, if with nothing else. She worked so hard to earn her money! She did earn it, and what, you may ask, in view of that, did it matter that she was such a transparent humbug as an artist, that she knew nothing of logic, of decent composition, or of the probabilities? The fact that without any of the attributes of the artist she was able to impress a large proportion of the novel-readers of our time, is what gives her the right to be mentioned here. She typified the point that the Eternal Mediocre could reach, both in achievement and in acceptance.

To consider the awful and endless score of her novels would serve simply as a sort of mental suicide. But one may cite an example or so, showing what sort of stuff it was that our readers patiently suffered because they thought they were being told the truth about European society.

I recall, for instance, a novel called "Ziska" that was full of a lot of hocus-pocus about reincarnation, and swapping of souls; it should be remembered for the reason that both Robert Hichens and E. F. Benson wrote on very similar matters, and if you wish to see the difference between how to write and how not to write you have only to compare the Corelli novel with "Flames" or with "The Image in the Sand." In "Ziska," as in all the multitude of equally noisy novels from her pen,



Miss Corelli delighted in showing her contempt for that weird vision of her own that she labels English society. She called it a "giddy-pated, dancing, gabbling throng," and abounded in desperate adjectives, all calculated to tickle the chambermaids. The discriminating reader might laugh at Marie Corelli's satire—satire that had the keenness of the road-scraper—and might find her melodrama ridiculous; that never disturbed her as long as the chambermaids continued to buy her books. She went on, year after year, using the worn-out "properties" of sensationalism, and offending gaily against taste, logic and grammar. The chambermaids escaped unharmed from the awful mazes of her rhetoric, and her efforts to engraft "these kind" on the English language left them calm; they had never used any other formula. Why, there was even one admirer so devout—Annie Mackay was her name, and Philadelphia saw her delivered of her book—as to collect together a number of "Beauties of Marie Corelli" and so rank her with de Rochefoucauld, and Chesterfield, and Oscar Wilde. In those "Beauties" there were many lovely fragments; I must ask you to have patience, while we consider a few of them.

A curious phenomenon was phrased thus:

"I know I once had a few glimmerings of the swift lightning called genius in me, and that my thoughts were not precisely like those of everyday men and women."

She herself, you see, admits it. If her thoughts had been like any other thoughts in the world, she could not have seen lightning glimmering. She herself called it genius. Others might call it simply maudlin metaphor. Again in another place she exclaimed:

"Mon Dieu! if I had but the gift of writing I could conquer the world."

Well, there was never any doubt as to the intention. It was ever a case of, as the Frenchman put it, "The ghost is willing, but ze meat is feeble." If the gift of writing, as she admits, was denied to her, why did she

go on writing? She was a genius; you must not expect logic from a genius. She was also a philosopher. Observe the originality, the pungency of some of her philosophies:

“Methinks those who are best beloved of the gods are chosen first to die. . . . In this world no one, however harmless, is allowed to continue happy. . . . The mind soon grows fatigued with pondering. It is better not to think. . . .”

Far, far better. If, by avoiding thought, and logic, and grammar, you may become the literary goddess of the mentally unwashed, why attempt any of those things? Marie Corelli, every time she put pen to paper, violated all the laws of intelligence and language, and all truth and all probability, yet, in the affection of the Majority, she was cousin to the Isle of Man and sister to Hall Caine, as Mr. John Davidson's nun might have said in a ribald moment. The triteness of Martin Tupper dwindled before the balderdash of Marie Corelli, yet there were those who went to the trouble of selecting specimens, as if she had been a Voltaire or a Schopenhauer.

There was no problem too grave that she would shrink from it. When such writers as Mrs. Humphry Ward and George Moore and John Oliver Hobbes and Richard Bagot were writing novels in which the Church of Rome played a leading part, Marie Corelli must do what she could to outshout them. She wrote “The Master Christian.” If it had not been by her, if it had not been written in Corelli but in English, it might have been something of an appeal to the judicious, something of a logical arraignment of the Romish Church. Instead it had the tone of the Hyde Park orator, the fire and fervor of the stump speech. It had also, exaggerated to the point of the ridiculous, the trick, so skilfully used by Mrs. Humphry Ward, of constantly parading before the reader important, powerful and aristocratic personages.

Let us jot down some of the characters that filled the

stage in this curious melodrama. There was the "*Abbé Vergniaud*," "a notable character of the time in Paris"; *Angela Sovrani* was the "most exclusive lady in Europe" and "the painter of the finest picture ever seen since Raffaele and Michael Angelo"; the *Princess d'Agramont* was "one of the best known society leaders in Europe"; *Sylvie Hermenstein* was a "very well known personage in Europe," and *Aubrey Leigh* was "generally admitted to be something of a remarkable character in Europe." You see what an elegant company it was. If that aggregation of European celebrities was one to make the judicious smile, it was quite as surely one to appeal to the chambermaid intelligence that this author was determined to enthrall. The people who read Marie Corelli at all swallowed her social display wholesale; they never paused to note that in all this bombast there was neither discretion nor sense of proportion, and that even the style had heaped-up adjectives in it that loomed absurd and tautological.

It was when she pretended anger at the sins of society, when she took the attitude of Father Vaughan and Mrs. Ormiston Chant and Carrie Nation, that she was perhaps at her best,—which, if one keep art in mind at all—was her worst. Paris, the modern spirit, social France and Italy in general, the "haute mode"—whatever, in her fearsome foreign vocabulary, that may be!—how all these roused her to frenzied prose! Paris is doomed. "Her men are dissolute, her laws are corrupt, her arts decadent, her religion dead. . . . Paris is hopelessly pagan; nay, not even pagan, for the pagans had gods, and Paris has none." The most fashionable mode in France, England, Italy and Spain, according to the author of "*The Master Christian*," was the philosophy of the Beast. She dismissed the theatre in a few pointed words: "What it is to be a manager! Do you know? It is to keep a harem like a grand Turk. . . ." Then there were the lilies of France, "emblems of honor, loy-

alty, truth and chivalry! What smudged and trampled blossoms they seem to-day!"

And so on. Everything, you see, in the superlative degree. Everything noisy and loud and incoherent. Everybody was the most fashionable or the most notorious person in Europe; everything was so superlative that nothing stood out in any relief. The author wrote, as some women talk, in a tremendously swift stream that means nothing at all. She tried in that particular story to vent a number of her pet aversions, such as the Church of Rome, the social conditions in France and Italy, and the tone of English society, but she spilled her spleen at such a childish rate that one could see nothing but a random spluttering; she impressed one, in this book as in all her others, in all her so-called pictures of English and international society, not with her arguments, but with the sight of herself in a temper.

Hysterical indiscretions met one at every turn. In her fury at what she called Parisian decadence, she poked about among some of the writers in that clique, and mentioned them as if she really knew them at first hand. She referred to "our hysterical little boy, Catallus Mendés," making one wonder if she had taken an oath to be inaccurate, even in names; and she linked "Lord Byron, and Maeterlinck and Heinrich Heine" as "wicked persons."

After that, need one mention that the limit of her French is the word "Tiens! Tiens!" incessantly repeated?

But what mattered these little departures from fact, and from coherence? Just as shrewdly as Mrs. Humphry Ward had she gauged our appetite; her appeal to American readers was nothing less than amusing. She might revile Paris; she might declare both art and religion dead in Italy; but she saw the dawning of "a new faith" in America. The faith she cared about was the American faith in Marie Corelli as a dispenser of information about society.

Had there been in our majority any sense of proportion, any glimmer of grammar, none of this melodramatic ranting, none of this exuberant nonsense, and none of this villainous English, could have drawn anything but ridicule. We know that the books sold, and that the majority thought them "perfectly elegant," so that the only consolation the critic could win from the whole matter was to accept it, to accept even these boundlessly foolish novels of Marie Corelli as part of the history of the literary taste of the time. This was what the Eternal Feminine could accomplish when it set out to play fast and loose with facts, with logic and with grammar; here was the writing-woman reaching, finally, the very lowest depth of mediocrity; here was what the novel had become in the age of the woman novelist's dominance!

"It is best," Marie Corelli remarked once, "to let eternal subjects like God and Shakespeare alone."

The critic who would keep sweet his sense of humor and his optimism about literature, must amend that into "God and Shakespeare and Corelli," and trust that we have passed that point in the growth of taste when the chambermaid and her author can ever again dominate the scene.

How completely the Corelli influence extended to America, was proved not only by the sale of her books here, but by the fact that, just as Henry James stimulated the literary activities of Edith Wharton, the author of "The Master Christian" came to have American after-types. Before we look at the really valuable work done by women in the field of social fiction, I must ask you to glance at what was perhaps the most abortive effort ever made by an American in the domain of fiction about international society. In that domain we had the many fine achievements of Henry James; but those examples did not prevent an American woman from choosing the Corelli model. I remember nothing in the recent



annals of American letters so melancholy as Lilian Bell's efforts to prove herself equal to the authoress in ordinary to the British chambermaid.

Judged by her work, Lilian Bell came to the Corelli stage of her career logically; she was out of Chicago, by the Philadelphia *Ladies' Home Journal*. All who had watched her writing, through its phases of giving advice to bachelors, and hinting autobiographically at the inner lives of old maids, must have expected the psychologic Corellian moment in her sooner or later. In her very first novel she proved herself Marie Corelli's aptest pupil. Its name was "The Expatriates." As to its plot, and its international comparisons, those were entirely negligible; we had had them all before from sources of more authority. What was noticeable in the book was the striking similarity in method and mushiness to the author of "The Master Christian." Here were the same meaningless superlatives, the same inability to put things into their proper scale, and the same overshooting all marks by way of gush and gabble. Here, too, was the same frothing at the wickedness of Paris. A novel offset to that was a seriously intended rhapsody over a somewhat smelly after-the-theatre resort in Chicago which, for want of a better place, long monopolized the patronage of the world and a half of that metropolis. Here, again, were showers of bad French; where Marie clung to "Tiens! Tiens!!" Lilian depended mostly on "Mon Dieu!"

And here, finally, were the characters in "The Expatriates"; you may judge if they were not made wholly of Corelli cloth:

*Townshend*—"One of the best whips in New York; and the best shot in Arizona."

*De Briancourt*—"The most sought after man in all Paris."

*D'Auteuil*—"With the most beautiful hands in Paris."

*Baronne Valencia*—"Knew everybody all over the world who were worth knowing."

*Mr. Hollenden*—"Wealth estimated conservatively at sixty million of dollars."

Will you cast that lot parallel with those wonderful people in "The Master Christian":

*The Abbé Vergniaud*—"A notable character of the time in Paris."

*Angela*—"The most exclusive lady in Europe."

*Princess d'Agramont*—"One of the best known society leaders in Europe."

*Sylvie*—"A charming and very well known personage in Europe."

*Aubrey*—"Something of a remarkable character in Europe."

Just as Marie Corelli represented the lowest depth in literary art reached in England by a woman pretending social portraiture in fiction, so Lilian Bell marked the most hopeless point touched by an American in the same province. If the Englishwoman's point of view and manner of expression were that of a garrulous chambermaid, the American voiced the views and speech of those Cook's tourists who judge Paris from the information dispensed by megaphone on omnibuses.

It seems, indeed, as one considers the case, as if in writing about society, English, American and international, the essentially feminine cast of mind made mostly for failure. Though the feminist intelligence could touch strange peaks on sex subjects, as we have seen by many examples, it rarely reached the proper pitch of reason and logic that produces social history. What success must needs be attributed to Mrs. Humphry Ward was due to a certain masculine quality in her. The ladies could spill passion recklessly enough; but when it came to the more serious matters, to the novel of manners, for instance, we had either the pure slop of Marie Corelli or the James-and-water of Edith Wharton. It was not until we reach the women who had masculine minds, that we find novelists who were valuable historians of society.

Of these I shall remind you of three: John Oliver Hobbes, Gertrude Atherton, and H. A. Mitchell Keays.

To have written one fine book is more than falls to the lot of most. Fine, if not great, was at least one book by John Oliver Hobbes. When the writer who assumed that male signature died, there died one of the most talented Americans of our time. And just as Mrs. Craigie chose the veil of masculinity for her prose, so we came eventually to admit the masculinity of her mind. As a social historian she ranked with the best of her time. If other women had shown how low the novelist of society could fall, Mrs. Craigie, in at least one book, proved what heights were possible.

That book was "The School for Saints."

It was the book of its year, as I pointed out at the time, to the very general astonishment of my entourage, and as I now see more clearly than ever. That year was a dozen years ago; but the story has lost none of its charm.

From astonishing us, in "Some Emotions and a Moral," and several other volumes with much be-commaed titles, by her brilliant dialogue and rapier-like thrusts through the surface of our Anglo-Saxon shams and society, John Oliver Hobbes reached, in "The School for Saints," a height that lifted her well into the front rank of those who were writing English fiction. Not Meredith had more sparkle, though vastly more cryptic. Her style held, in addition to the brilliant talk she had always reproduced so deftly, the glow of romance and a philosophy that came near to true religiosity. The book had the fine flower of her talent; she never went higher, neither in "Robert Orange" nor the following novels that were published before her death.

To readers of the author's earlier books, "The School for Saints" exposed an unexpectedly commanding grip on serious things. The title stood for "that school for

saints which has often been called the way of the world." The book was perhaps the finest achievement in that domain of historical fiction which touched the struggle between modern worldliness and the Catholic Church; not even the work of George Moore looms more memorable.

The canvas on which the book was painted was large. History, treated in a charmingly personal manner, hung as a colorful background. Skilfully, picturesquely, and more accurately than any Mühlbach, Mrs. Craigie gave us delightful silhouettes of such personages as Disraeli, and General Prim. She interested us in Don Carlos, Duke of Madrid; she gave us such fine glimpses of diplomatic England in the days of the Irish Church bill as seemed almost too clever to be true. And all these fine people, all these fine things, she presented to us in such wise that—instead of laughing, as we had to do when a Corelli bombarded us with her assemblages of "persons famous throughout Europe"—we felt we were indeed moving among great personages, in great places, with a very brilliant gentlewoman as our guide. Observe the taste of fine analysis in her speech about Disraeli; a speech full of an irony anent the British character that only a woman with some touch of the foreign in her could have written—always excepting John Galsworthy, neither woman nor foreign, who was to come ten years later. This was the speech:

"He won't be fully appreciated till every manjack of this generation is dead. He's too brilliant—he makes us all feel very dull dogs and very lame ducks. And he isn't an Anglo-Saxon—another crime. To be sure, we call him clever—*infinitely clever*; and we listen to his wit—as we watch a comedian—with amusement, which, however, we should be sorry to derive from anyone who had better claims to our society."

You have only to think of Primrose Day, and how little Disraeli is forgotten to-day, to know how truly Mrs. Craigie wrote.

In "The School for Saints" the author began the story of *Robert Orange*, a young man of the finest parts, destined for the English parliament; a young man of intense emotions and a talent for adventure. The book told, chiefly, of his love for *Brigit Parflete*, who had been married, while scarce out of her convent, to a conscienceless courtier. The value of those pages, however, was hardly so much in the plot they carried, as in their reproduction of the mental and religious tempers through which the personages, chiefly *Robert*, passed. It was one of those rare volumes that invited in even the most tired reader a desire for more of dissertation, less of action. Never, in this book, was John Oliver Hobbes dull. A fragment in the very first chapter telling of *Robert's* first visit to Miraflores remains one of the pleasantest prose idyls in our language. Solitary, as a short story, you could rank it with some of the pages of Theocritus. Rarely had the breaking of a young man's first enchantment been more artistically told. She had promised him a second interview. He finds her villa deserted. An old woman tells him she is gone.

"Her life is just beginning—that is all. She went away laughing and singing. She's a great cocotte."

"What is that?" asked Robert.

"Mon Dieu!" said the old woman. "Have you never met one?"

"Never," said the boy.

"They are very pretty, and they want money, and they tell lies. Why do you close your eyes, Monsieur?"

"The glare is too strong," said Robert, "I must go home."

It was *Brigit's* mother who so enchanted and disenchanted *Robert* in early youth. *Brigit* herself grew up to many sorrows; she was to learn that her father was an archduke whose marriage with her mother was only morganatic; she was to find her husband a purchasable cur; and she was to take comfort only in her convent and



in *Robert's* friendship. As for *Robert*, fortune took him through mental processes that left him Papist, though a member of parliament. He had adventures by fire and sword in Spain; he lived much; he had written books; he had known many men and many lands; he had been well beloved of at least two women; and he emerged from all that varied early life to become a very earnest faithful powerful man. In the book called "*Robert Orange*" readers could follow his later career; but Mrs. Craigie never completely regained the compelling charm of "*The School for Saints*," not even in the latter half of it that she called by that other name. Still, to compare with "*Evelyn Innes*" and "*Sister Teresa*," the two John Oliver Hobbes books are well worth reading to-day. That quartet of books belongs definitely to the history of social thought at the end of the nineteenth century.

Fine sketches of character, and keen apothegms were everywhere in this book. There was *Baron Zenill*, shrewd financier and diplomat, easy still to parallel in the flesh, to whom "all Kings and Emperors, Powers and Dominions, were as persons in the great struggle between Jew and Gentile." There was *Henry Berenville*, who took to art, and painted people's voices. There was that delightful *Lord Wight*, who felt so keenly sad when *Robert* left him to propose to *Brigit*, that he maundered to his butler:

"Poor young man! . . . Young people like each other's society—especially of an opposite sex! . . . Eshelley!"

"Yes, my lord."

"How all this reminds me of '29 and Lady Sybil. I suppose I was quite as agitated and—extraordinary on the night of the dinner at Madame de Lieven's?"

"Every bit, my lord. Gentlemen are all the same, my lord. So are men. Will your lordship take both hot water bottles?"

"Both."

Here were a couple of sharp sentences, delightful to compare to the balderdash so brazenly exploited as axiomatic by Marie Corelli:

"The truest modesty is three parts pride."

"I have wished that theatre-going were a moral obligation, for then we should have a highly critical audience, and, as a consequence, good plays."

There were occasional references to America:

"This Old World is now mere literature—nothing else. It is the best of all possible libraries. But if you want drama—if you want to see the stuff that life and history are made of—you must cross the Atlantic."

Again:

"Cosmopolitanism is a beautiful word, if it be understood to mean liberty for all men; when, however, it means, as it seems to mean in the case of a great Republic I could name, an indiscriminate hospitality, you will find that the host will wake one morning to find himself shivering in nakedness on his own doorstep."

A dozen years after that sentence was printed Henry James, returned after many years' absence, noted publicly in his book, "The American Scene," the fact that everywhere in our land it was the alien who had a vigorous and triumphant air, the American who lacked it.

I myself, I remember, met the same thought as the result of personal experience. I had been several days in the saddle; riding through the most civilised part of our Atlantic seaboard. Always, in approaching, in passing through, and in leaving, town after town, village after village, it was the facial dominance of the alien that struck me; until I found myself wondering how many of these people, if I should have to ask them a question, would understand or speak a word of English!

Yes, it was a fine book, was "The School for Saints," and some of its wisdom—as in the case of that last quoted sentence—increases with the years. Nor is its charm yet faded. I recall still with delight that passage,

toward the end of the book, wherein a dialogue takes place between an old nobleman and one who had asked whither *Robert* had taken his bride. *Robert* had returned to Miraflores with his bride; it was the month of May when *Robert* first came there. At Miraflores the birds forever sang, the sun forever shone, the breeze was the perpetual honeyed breath of an eternal summer. At Miraflores there were no yesterdays and no to-morrows. From the sea sloped woods and winding alleys, flower-girt, to where white terraces told of the presence of the Villa Miraflores. Many years had passed between that month of May and *Robert's* return with his bride. Asked where they had gone our old nobleman answered:

"To the Villa Miraflores."

"Where is that?"

"It is near an ancient fortress, on a great rock, on the northern coast of France."

"Well," said the Dominican, "we have rocks and the sea here."

"Oh, yes," answered Lord Wight, "we have rocks and the sea——"

"And the sky," added the priest, "and Almighty God."

He looked up, as he spoke, to the heavens, where the sun was not silent.

"True. But," said Lord Wight, looking with a sigh at the grim ruins of Slatrach, "we have not the Villa Miraflores."

"Well," said the old priest serenely, "they are as happy as we are, *mon fils*. For there, too, at Miraflores, is Almighty God!"

What a relief, what a relief, to remember at last a book, written by a woman, that was at once fine art and fine entertainment!"

## CHAPTER EIGHT

IF there was something masculine in the fiction of Mrs. Craigie, there was still more of it in that of Gertrude Atherton. As an historian of American, Californian and international society she deserves serious appreciation. Though she is become personally almost as expatriated as Mrs. Craigie or Henry James, the Americanism in her subject matter assures her a place in any comparative record of our achievements. Despite much garrulity and excess in her work, betraying the writer's sex, the courage and forthright qualities in her proved that masculine side to her mind which made her a success as a social historian. How the lack of that masculine cast of thought made for failure has been shown in the cases of more than one woman novelist.

When Ouida died, it occurred to me that she might have been the model on which, half consciously, half unconsciously following nature's lead, Gertrude Atherton patterned herself as a writer. Ouida's mind, too, was a man's rather than a woman's. Mrs. Atherton need not quarrel with the comparison, for if there was one quality more than another in Ouida which the intelligent must admit it is that she *Could Write*. Allow the "putting it on too thick"; allow the many well-known "breaks"—the racing scene in "*Under Two Flags*," etc., etc.,—allow all that, all of which you will also find in the works of Mrs. Atherton, and still there stands out the great fact, the fact that distinguished her from ninety-nine of the so-called novelists of our day, that Ouida *Knew How to Write*. For years the opulence of her imagination, the fecundity of her phrases, found massed against her that mightiest force in all England, namely, Eng-

land's stupidity. The same dull inertia of intellect, the same immobility of thought (misnamed by its protagonists "conservatism"), that aroused Bernard Shaw to some of his keenest thrusts, barred the way to Ouida. The mob, it is true, carried away by the Oriental fervor in her earlier work, made her their idol; though not with any finer acumen than the critics who condemned her. Eventually even the critics came to see the value of her work. No writer in the last fifty years had been richer in the gifts that make the great storyteller. She had imagination and dramatic force enough to furnish a dozen of our "novelists of the day." Her wealth of phrase and invention was so great that she never would stop to revise. Corelli and Hall Caine together are not worth her worst pages. Had she cared to prune and snip, she might have equaled the reputations of Disraeli and Wilde for epigram.

The same exuberance, the same masculinity of thought, marked Gertrude Atherton. Her career, however, was very different. Let us glance at that career. It has been of great interest throughout; Mrs. Atherton has shown what could be done in writing historical American novels, novels tracing the varying stages of civilisation in old and new California, and novels of international marriage; and she has, in short, done more than any other American woman to discover, in fiction, the manifold and often amazing qualities that go to make up our society in the making. It is only fair that we judge her, not by a single book, but by a consideration, however brief, of her gradual artistic progress.

She herself, in late editions, divided her novels into those within the California Series, and those without. In actual numbers the books other than Californian are in the lead; in value to the historian of society the Californian books take precedence. At many points the books within and without the series touch; if you think of the Californian books as simply descriptive of one province



in American society, then you can think of "Patience Sparhawk" as covering New York, and of "Senator North" as giving us Washington, while in "The Aristocrats" there was quite as keen social comparison as in "American Wives and English Husbands" which latter is placed in the Californian Series.

Her early indiscretions, however, Mrs. Atherton no longer admits very loudly. Yet they remain part of her artistic baggage, and without them she might never have been heard of. That, too, is part of American literary history, that with such books as "Hermia Suydam" and "What Dreams May Come," calculated—coldly and deliberately calculated to shock, a writer like Gertrude Atherton should make her first appeals to the public. She knew her public. At the end of the 'Eighties it still refused to be stirred by anything but the sensational, and the more sexual the sensation the better. For literature it had apparently lost whatever taste the periods of Poe, and Washington Irving, and Hawthorne, should have bred; for the prosperity period of the 20th century, the period of ruinous competition between "best sellers" boomed as industriously as breakfast-foods,—for all these we were not yet ready. So Mrs. Atherton wrote her unpleasant brace of novels; she made her sensational little stir; she was launched. Futile, now, to attempt accurate division of the blame; the public taste of the time must share it with the shrewd unscrupulousness of an author determined to succeed. Shrewdness, too, was in her not properly signing those early stories; she is able, to-day, to ignore them when in her newest book she lists those "by the same author."

Although years afterward she printed a story that is given chronologic precedence in her Californian Series, it was not until "The Dooms woman" appeared that Gertrude Atherton had artistically to be reckoned with. Here, for the first time, the critic could seriously consider her. Here, for the first time, she showed, quite

aside from her picturesque and valuable reproduction of early Californian life, that courage about the relations between man and woman in our world which was afterwards to distinguish all of her work. Here first she proved the broad outlook that led one to apply the term masculine to her cast of thought. She voiced here the realisation that woman is monogamous, man polygamous; she painted man as a creature of complex desires, in whom the animal and divine so strangely mingle that he can love one woman to the death, while allowing his lighter affections to play with others. When "The Dooms-woman" appeared, in 1893, I ventured the opinion that in her work would surely be found some of the best fiction to be written by American women in the next quarter of a century. To-day, fifteen years later, that prophesy is by no means matter for regret.

Aside from those pages in "The Dooms-woman" which foreshadowed the future painter of large canvases in a manner truly large, one closed the book with a sense of having been in a land of delightful languor, of velvet and lace, of honeyed words and sudden flashes of passion, of heels clicking to the rhythm of *El Son*, and of music playing love songs. The air was full of laughter and songs, festivities and flirting; handsome men in jackets bespangled with diamonds, and wearing *sombreros* bedecked with plumes; beautiful girls with the gold of California boiling in their veins and the long lashes of Spain shading their languorous eyes—all these joined in a very vivid picture of life in Early California. It may not have been historic; but it was a very interesting effort to make history charming, an effort that Mrs. Atherton was later to repeat in the case of Alexander Hamilton. In the background of that romantic picture of the still somewhat Spanish California of "The Dooms-woman" we saw the coming of American materialism. Out of the contrasts between the Californian character—compound of Spanish romance and American practi-

cality—and the character of European civilisations, Mrs. Atherton was afterwards to glean her strongest stories. The gulf between the themes of “The Doomswoman” and of “Ancestors” is not so vast; it is the increase in the artist’s skill and power that is most noticeable. Whatever excursions she made into other fields, it was to California—California in its provincial and its international relations to Anglo-Saxon society—that her art, at its happiest, turned.

One of her excursions away from California was called “Patience Sparhawk and Her Times.” This was a very vivid, unflattering picture of society in New York. It was a large canvas, the colors laid on boldly. Always, indeed, after her first tentative essays in fiction, this author worked with a sweeping brush upon a goodly canvas; she risked all the dangers that come from exuberance and carelessness; only by the real value of her matter and the impression of courageous and original thinking did her books survive their obvious defects. “Patience Sparhawk,” in spite of many such obvious defects, remained a noteworthy novel, and marked a considerable artistic advance over “Hermia Suydam,” the heroine of which had not very dissimilar problems. No more adequate exposition of the different ferments and forces in our Eastern civilisation had been made than “Patience Sparhawk.” Its problem concerned the evolutions of a soul free from dogma, a soul upon whom the incidents and accidents possible in this high-keyed age had varying and always interesting effects.

The author’s clarity of vision, and boldness of expression showed in the opinions she here gave of society in New York,—opinions that she was later, in “The Aristocrats” and other books, to amplify and repeat. There were caustic pages explaining, without reserve, just what was necessary, in point of turpitude, to become a modern queen of opera-bouffe; and there were humorous

pages referring to the dear dames of the W. C. T. U., in Yonkers and other Westchester County preserves, who guard so busily our American morals. The "swagger New York type" of girls was described as "the marble statue with the snub nose"; New York men were said to "admire God because he made himself of their gender," and our society girls were finally summed up in a passage noting "their tiny waists and hips, their narrow chests and modest busts . . . their polished skin and brilliant shallow eyes, their elegant sexless forms, their haughty pose and supercilious air. . . ." From even such brief excerpts you may note some of this writer's virtues and vices; she always had the courage of her opinions, and to voice them she cared little for smoothness, or feared tautology. In an age of literary compromise, it was for the courage of her opinions that we forgave her much. In this book she was bold enough to assert that most husbands in our American upper 10,000 are unfaithful to their wives, and that most wives in that same sphere dispel ennui by taking lovers; and she chanced the displeasure of that dangerous tyranny, the press, by stating that "the under-bred newspaper man touches a lower notch of vulgarity than any person of similar social degree the world over."

The general tone of finding fault with New York society that marked "Patience Sparhawk" was later the central theme of "The Aristocrats," which Mrs. Atherton published anonymously, but later acknowledged. Artistically she need never have been ashamed of it. The salutary, ironical truth about the would-be aristocratic trend in America had never been better told.

Our aristocratic ambitions and uneasy strivings were made the keenest fun of; there were several definite caricatures of known individuals; and the heroine, *Lady Helen*, English and titled, who voiced all these observations upon our body social, was nothing less than delightful. Our mysterious social distinctions bewildered her so

utterly; she was so eager to discover who really practised the fine American theory that all are free and equal. She found the sales-lady looking down on the hired help, and "the very best sets" looking down on everyone else. She found an intellectual set, which tried to give the aristocratic note to all art and all life, and which was "endeavoring to create a rarefied atmosphere which only the elect can enter, where those that do enter prove themselves to be of the elect." In that set were all "the successful brains of New York" and *Lady Helen's* picture of those brilliant men and women was worth any reader's while. Their aristocracy overwhelmed her; she could not understand it; she had been so used to taking certain things for granted. Only rarely did she meet a sensible person, who admitted these follies, and added: "When we've got twenty generations to the good we'll be just as unconscious about it as you are. But aristocracy will be a sort of itch with us till then. Quantities of idiots have their family trees framed."

Finally, it was in this book that Mrs. Atherton paid American literature that compliment which has ever remained memorable. It was at the period, you must remember, when the influence of the matinee girl and of Mellin's Food was uppermost. The speech was put into the mouth of a certain popular and successful author, one of the intellectual aristocrats at whom the whole satire was aimed:

"You think I'm an ass," he said, "and I am. I have to be. I nearly starved, trying to be a man, so I became an emasculated backboneless poseur to please the passionless women and the timid publishers of the United States. To please the sort of American woman who makes the success of a novelist—the faddist and the gusher—you must tickle her with the idea that she is a superior being because she has no passion, and that you are creating a literature which only she can appreciate—she with a refinement and a bleached and laundried set of



tastes which have made her a tyrannical middle-class enthusiast for all that is unreal and petty in art! . . . I wish I had been born an Englishman. To be great in English literature, you've only to be dull; but to be great in American literature you've got to be a eunuch."

Strong language was ever one of Mrs. Atherton's possessions. Not stronger, however, were those words than the case called for. Only one thing, however, she omitted to point out—the theme of many of my preceding chapters—namely, that to the woman novelist was permitted such license as few male writers cared to take.

From American society to the American Senate Mrs. Atherton crossed easily; in "Senator North" she proved that she could write an historical novel that, whether accurate or not, was certainly good reading.

The whole pattern of fashionable as well as political life in Washington was here carefully traced. She gave us social and official life in the capital, at the time of our war with Spain; she made the actual personages of that day romantic under but thin disguises. The sanity of her point of view was more inexorable than ever before; by its light she reviewed for us the good and the bad in that curious vortex of aristocracy and bureaucracy. The sketches of old Washingtonians, of the set that knew nothing of men in public life, and did not want to know them; the pen-portraits of various easily recognised senators and cabinet ministers; all were unfailingly interesting.

As little as in "Patience Sparhawk" she spared New York did she now spare Washington; but she had gained in skill. She now gave both sides of her pictures. Though she painted the New England politicians, the Westerners, and their wives and daughters, sharply enough; she also gave us the spectacle of the heroine attempting to refute the notion, held by the Old Washingtonians—the "cave dwellers"—that twangs and tooth-

picks and Uncle Sam beards constituted the main features of all American statesmen. Though she omitted no accusation that the worst enemy of American government ever made against that system and its members, yet the book was, in the main, an effort to prove that the affairs of our nation are honestly conducted, just as Paul Leicester Ford had once attempted a similar task, in "Peter Stirling."

What was for long this writer's ruling passion still dominated the central theme of "Senator North"; but at this remove of time it is only the pictures of Washington's social and political life that remain valuable. That ruling passion was the depiction, in many and varied situations, of the American woman whose brilliant mind succeeds in conquering her passions. In her most mature books Mrs. Atherton merged that problem deftly into the larger ones of international social import which she undertook to handle; but it was never possible for her, in this detail, entirely to divorce the artist from the human being. The very nature of her art was too personal and unrestrained for that.

The vigorous infusion of her personality and her prejudice was what lent the primal charm to her historical novel about Alexander Hamilton. Whether that charm is now somewhat faded, whether we now realise that she may have helped Hamilton's fame as little by her passionate espousals as his detractors had before that harmed it—is another matter. What is quite sure is that it was very vigorous and effective special pleading, and that considered sheerly as an historical novel it came as a relief in a time when a very plague of inartistic and tedious novels misnamed historical was upon us.

For months, when our century was still an infant, the puerilities, the incorrigible falsehoods, and the slovenly methods of our "historical novels," had been dismaying the judicious. In "The Conqueror," at last, we had an

historic romance to the making of which had gone a genius of enthusiasm and imagination and prejudice. Certain pages in American history were here most romantically recreated. Just as in "Senator North" the social and diplomatic society of the national capital was shown as we know it to-day; so in "The Conqueror" we breathed the atmosphere of a hundred years ago.

If Hamilton, as a historic figure, had hitherto been neglected, Mrs. Atherton did her best to atone for that. Her passionate, romantic plea made him rank well up among the dominant figures of history or fiction. As a portrait we cannot now vouch for its accuracy; but as a picture—as a work of art, as a canvas by a Sargent seeing in his sitter qualities the mirror never showed—it deserves to rank with the best prose portraits of our time. As keenly as her prejudices permitted Mrs. Atherton had indulged in research among private and family papers; she had visited the West Indies and steeped herself in the scenes of Hamilton's youth; she had left nothing undone to impress her hero's romantic and intellectual stature upon the public. She succeeded indubitably in this, that as we read her book, the charm of it, and the passion of her pleading, fascinated us and persuaded us.

After having given us this romantic impression of Hamilton in 500 pages, Mrs. Atherton's steam was not, at that time, exhausted; she promised to follow this romance with a strict biography. That promise has not, so far, been kept; the enterprise, whether resulting in any definite increase of our historical knowledge or not, would have been interesting; our most attractive historical documents have ever been achieved by the aid of a fine healthy prejudice.

To all of Mrs. Atherton's human and artistic prejudices the character of Alexander Hamilton appealed irresistibly; the eminence in him of a cold-blooded intellect corresponded to that in her which, as already noted, was inseparably a part of her own equipment.

Colored by romantic prejudices though it was, this book held a picture of the formative period of our United States which must have appealed forcibly to the intelligence and taste of our better people. It was an argument calculated to awake much dormant aristocracy in us. If in "The Aristocrats" Mrs. Atherton vigorously flayed what was ridiculous and abortive in some of our Eastern efforts at social aristocracy, in "The Conqueror" she did something more than justice to the man who seemed to her the first real gentleman of America. If we are indeed far gone on the leveling, lowering way of that democracy which Hamilton himself so dreaded, we yet could not refuse appreciation to this picturesque portrait of a triumphant individualist.

Nothing that Gertrude Atherton ever did so commended her to the gratitude of what aristocracy may really exist in us as this book. The word aristocratic is to be used in full sense of its apparent danger; no other is possible. Hamilton was essentially aristocratic; the more the majority in America has moved from the ancient aristocratic ideals, the more keenly have those ideals impressed themselves upon the inevitable minority. In this book we had the intellectual splendors of a noble gentleman and a great statesman presented to us. We were asked to realise the dominant part played by Hamilton in the framing of these States, and in steering them through their first dangers; to value the prophetic wisdom of his measures; to admit him the first of the Imperialists, the leader of the legal profession and the greatest pamphleteer of his time. We were to believe him, while still a boy in years, intellectually overshadowing the entire country.

The book had, of course—quite aside from the detail of style, which must be touched later, in a more general view—its obvious defects. If in the early chapters, depicting Hamilton's youth, Mrs. Atherton had so deeply steeped herself in the West Indian atmosphere as to

prove herself a truly romantic novelist, in those later passages, where our personages moved amid scenes and actions for which history had long been witness, the author's powers flag; she was hampered by the hard facts, and her invention no longer responded even to the spur of prejudice.

At various intervals in her literary career Gertrude Atherton indulged in letters to the newspapers. Whether this was simply to expose her very vigorous prejudices to an audience that books did not appeal to; or was part of a shrewd campaign to keep herself in the public limelight at all hazards, would be hard to ascertain. Either, or both, of those reasons would be in keeping with her artistic character. She printed her slight opinion of American men broadcast on both sides of the Atlantic, and thereby stirred up an entertaining controversy. The decade that has elapsed since then has not disproven her case; you have only to consider the score of international marriages made by American women to realise that against the essence of aristocratic civilisation the European stands for our American men have nothing adequate to offer. Mrs. Atherton praised the British male, and she declared there wasn't an aristocratic nose in all New York. When she was not stirring up our animals with unpleasant comparisons like that, she was sailing head on into our literary conditions. In judiciously fanning newspaper controversy we have rarely had an author more successful than this one.

That her opinions on American women and English men deserve attention, however, for other than advertising purposes, we were eventually to have a number of serious and considerable novels as proof. In several large and almost epic canvases she proved herself one of our most thorough social historians.

With the growing ease and habit of intercourse between the social elements of America and England, the conse-



quent problems were yearly increasing in fascination for our writers on contemporary manners. Since Henry James, in the days of his youth, first began juggling this question of international marriage in his highly finished style, many novelists and essayists, on both sides of the Atlantic, had attacked the subject. Our newspapers shouted themselves hoarse on the same text; and when one of our daughters married a foreigner we had veritable swamps of descriptive gossip confronting us. The marriages might turn out badly; we might sermonise solemnly; the fact remained that they increased in number and conspicuousness.

Always excepting Mr. James, the literature of international marriage has nothing to show that goes more keenly to the roots of the matter than did the Atherton novels. She did not reach that point without steps aside, however. Novelettes called "The Traveling Thirds," "The Gorgeous Isle," and "His Fortunate Grace," were simply arrant and obvious potboiling. The last, for instance, was the story of a British nobleman and a Vanderbilt interwoven with any number of absurd and tasteless fancies. The contempt and oblivion into which that story fell must have had their warning to that side of Mrs. Atherton which failed to take seriously the responsibility of the artist. At any rate it was not long before she began a series of stories which proved that she could probe deep, and that she could fashion in prose strikingly thorough reviews of the temperamental differences between the two most frequently intermarrying Anglo-Saxon races.

In her assumption of titles, however, she occasionally assumed too much, as when in "American Wives and English Husbands" she posed as national certain types and characteristics that were only Californian. The heroine of that book was so thoroughly a Californian aristocrat, that to confound her with her equals of New York or her inferiors of Chicago would be alike impossible and

unjust. Not even Mrs. Atherton is equal to framing in prose the type, either male or female, that all of us would allow as national; nowhere on our continent has such a type yet come into being; we are Southern, or New England, or Middle Western, or Californian, or merely mongrels between Manhattan and Anglomaniac; but it will be many years before anything remotely resembling an American average is bred either in the actual or in literature. When Henry James offered "Daisy Miller" there began a chorus, denying her Americanisms, which is not yet still; yet he caught and held truer vision of the American girl than may be found anywhere else in letters, and the years have only confirmed the accuracy of his art.

In her depiction of the Californian character Mrs. Atherton had both skill and authority. Her knowledge of that country's early history, and of the birth and breeding and manner of thought of its natives, served her to good purpose in several sketches of beautiful, high-souled and brilliant young women whose marriages to Englishmen formed, in either the fact or the prospect, the main themes of such books as "The Californians," "American Wives and English Husbands" and "Ancestors." Her expositions of the difference between the massive conservatism, the solid depth of the Briton, and the quick nervousness of the Californians, were invariably interesting. What she set down dogmatically in one book, she occasionally refuted in the next; her sex still betrayed itself now and then. In one book she asserted the impossibility of moulding the British male away from the form the centuries had given him; she made one of her characters aver that:

"An Englishman is certain of several things if he marries a perfectly normal Englishwoman of his own class. She will obey him, she will have as many children as he wishes, her scheme of life will be his, and no matter how bright she may be, she will adapt herself to him

—which is not the least important point. An Englishman simply cannot adapt himself to anybody. It isn't in him. He can be a good husband on his own lines, particularly if he loves his wife; and if he loves her enough and she makes herself more charming than other women, he'll be faithful to her and make her happy. But she must adapt herself to him."

Yet within ten years after that was written, Mrs. Atherton printed "Ancestors," which undertook to prove that it was not impossible for an Englishman to adapt himself.

Inasmuch as "Ancestors" is so far the largest work Mrs. Atherton has attempted, and typifies the most characteristic of her virtues and her defects as a novelist, it is to be considered at somewhat greater length here. There, more than ever, the author adopted the large and epic manner that included all lest anything be omitted. She made things as difficult for the reader as possible; the mere size of the book was affrighting, and the canvas teemed bewilderingly with a multitude of people. But the clarity of the author's intelligence won through, and the power of the book eventually became its paramount quality.

Again we were made to feel keenly the high plane that social civilisation in England has reached, and again that high level is contrasted against the charms and the perils of our younger culture. Our author plunged a young English aristocrat from one of the most brilliant places in European statesmanship into the forefront of public life in California. From the certainties of his position in England he migrated to the uncertainties of California, to the hope of helping to cleanse the Augean stables of our politics, and to the tremendous task of rebuilding the San Francisco that fire and earthquake had felled. We saw him listening to the advice of a fair cousin, and to the pull of some far-away ancestral ties, and becoming a very fair sort of Californian, making up

his mind to try for something better than what had been his in England, namely, the winning his way in American public life through sheer force of individual character and brain without help of all that accumulation of family tradition that had helped him to his old eminence. We were again shown California and the Californians in a hundred varying moods; all those favorite topics the author enlarged; if we have not a vivid notion of the differing elements that went to the making of San Francisco society at the beginning of this century, it is not the fault of "Ancestors."

As in all of this author's other books the love-story was but incidental to the larger colors that are on the canvas, the colors of social contrasts, of temperamental differences, and finally of the magnificent and awful spectacle of San Francisco's decline and fall. Her heroine was again a rare combination of charm and reason, blood and brain, for which she could thank ancestors who were Spanish and Southern and Saxon, Caballeros and Argonauts. Vivid pictures of the social conglomerates in San Francisco society mingled with sketches of its reckless epicureanism.

In the final summing up "Ancestors" was an epic of San Francisco.

San Francisco first appeared in literature in an epigram of Oscar Wilde's. Its apotheosis is in "Ancestors." Here was painted all the brilliance of thought and word and deed that distinguished artistic San Francisco; all the electricity that made the town the home of the most promising and the most hopeless talents on our continent is in this book; and its human history before the earthquake will scarcely be better written. If the earthquake and the fire destroyed much that was memorable, they also gave us this book. Fashionable life, bohemian life, all-night life, were all sketched in a set of colorful pictures that deserve historic value. Unless you lived in San Francisco yourself, in that period, "Ancestors"

must hold your most vivid picture of it. The old-time glories are made brilliant, so that the contrast to the later ruins is all the sharper. Watching those ruins, one of the book's characters, who had ever enjoyed his San Francisco to the full, drank this toast to it, as it confronted him like a river of fire:

"Here's to Zinkand's, Tait's, the Palace Grill! The Poodle Dog! Marchand's! The Pup! Delmonico's! Coppa's! The Fashion! The Hotel de France! And here's to the Cocktail Route, the Tenderloin, and the Bohemian Club! And here's——" By this time his voice was dissolving, and the glass was describing eccentric curves. "Here's to the old city, whose like will never be seen this side of hell again. Pretty good imitation of heaven, in spots, and everything you chose to look for, anyway. And the prettiest women, the best fellows, the greatest all-night life, the finest cooking, the wickedest climate. Here's to San Francisco—and damn the bounder that calls her 'Frisco!"

Mrs. Atherton did not omit, in this novel, to aim arrows at some of her pet targets. We have seen, already, how in "The Aristocrats" and elsewhere she paid her respects to the conditions of literary success in America; now she returned to the matter in a paragraph that first touched those fashionable women in our modern society to whom passion is the only law:

"Those women don't repent, for they never admit that the laws of common mortals apply to them. . . . To mull themselves, commit some flagrant error that lands them in the divorce court, or high and dry in the outskirts—that is another matter. They repent then, *sans doute*; and get no mercy. We overlook everything at this apex of civilisation but stupidity. We respect the high-handed but not the light-headed. That is one reason those longwinded novels of sin and repentance—generally over one slip and when the man has wearied—leave us cold. We know too much. It seems such a lot



of fuss about so little. If some of these good, painstaking and—let us whisper it—bourgeoisie novelists had seen one-tenth of the pagan disregard for all they cherish most highly, that I have seen, and if they only could be made to comprehend—which they never could—how absolutely admirable these same women are in many other respects—such capacity for deep undying friendship, such uncalculating loyalty, such racial possibilities of heroism—well, they would do a good deal harder thinking than they have had to do yet, if they attempted to readjust their traditions to the actual facts of life.”

There were many pages in “Ancestors” that no American could read without equal glow of shame and pride. One of the country’s firmest optimists was made to say that “the country’s politics are the worst part of it, because circumstances have forced them into the hands of a class of men that make their living out of them, and whose natural destiny was pocketpicking and the Rogues’ Gallery,” yet to conclude that “the great statesman of the future is going to be the lawyer that checks the power of the unscrupulous capital, without at the same time delivering the country over to the mercies of that equally unscrupulous tyranny, the labor union.”

To quote from Gertrude Atherton is a gentle way of approaching the obvious defects in her writing. Not one of the quotations I have made—though I made them without that intention—will stand careful analysis as specimens of good English. Matter has ever been this author’s concern, not manner; her successes have been by virtue of a sort of brutal strength, a blind and garrulous forging ahead toward an aim, something akin to those British warriors whom an historic phrase depicts as “muddling through somehow.” Mrs. Atherton always muddled through somehow; but she never more thoroughly muddled her readers than in some of the pages of “Ancestors.” It was proof that, however she had broadened in

her grasp of life, as an artist in English she had advanced no whit since she wrote "The Doomswoman." "Ancestors" was a book of 700 pages; if two-sevenths in that mass of words had been elided the story had been the better for it; and that applies to almost all of her later novels.

Her style, at its best, has the virtue of driving straight ahead; if elegance is not attempted, simplicity at least is there. But in the opening of "Ancestors" she was taken with a most amazing fit of stammering. It was as if she had suddenly adopted a farrago of Meredith, James and the Dear Lord Knows Who. This was what she wrote:

"When she had accepted the invitation of one of the old castle playmates to visit her in Florence, it had been with a lively anticipation that made dismay the more poignant in the face of hypochondria."

It took several pages of stuff like that before she found her own fairly lucid, graphic gait. It was exactly as if, being out of practice, her hand had suddenly lost its cunning. Yet, towards the close of "Ancestors," or at least after 487 pages, she could again write: "Her eyes were very bright, and her cheeks deeply flushed, but were the cause a fully satisfied ambition, he could only guess," an awkwardness of style from which our author is evidently never to be divorced. Carelessness of English is not her only vice; she is often careless of her facts, so that her Munich references in "Ancestors" are more impressionistic than accurate. She did not, in the same book, trouble to have "dienstmann" and "Boerse" spelled correctly, and she adhered to the fallacy of spelling (p. 385) a grill in a wall as if it had other origin than the grill we cook over.

On page 369 of "The Conqueror" we found this:

Jefferson, in the Cabinet, protested with such solemn persistence against so dangerous a precedent, namely the stamp-

ing of the head of President Washington on the coins of the newly established mint, and Hamilton perforated him with such arrows of ridicule, that Washington exploded with wrath and demanded to know if neither never intended to yield a point to the other.

It would be hard to find anything more awkward than the last clause in the pages of any writer pretending to the first class. Again, in the same book, singular and plural were wonderfully mixed, as my italics in the following quotation, from page 166, show:

Washington gave battle to *the British* at Brandwine, was defeated, and in the following month surprised *it* at Germantown, and was defeated again. Nevertheless, he had astonished the enemy with his strength and courage so soon after a disastrous battle. To hold Philadelphia was impossible, however, and *the British* established *themselves* in the Capital of the colonies, making, as usual, no attempt to follow up *their* victories.

In a writer who could make one forget such crudities of style and manner as Gertrude Atherton's books are full of, there must indeed be much other virtue. Of what her virtue as a social historian in fiction consisted I have done my best to remind you.

In the work of H. A. Mitchell Keays the masculine breadth of view was so dominant that at least one critic held it to be by a man. When the author's femininity was discovered, it was easy enough to find touches that only a woman's heart and knowledge could have dictated; yet the masculinity of outlook remained, and one could deliberately give this writer the palm for having most boldly expressed the bravest view of certain basic features of our body social that have ever been put in form of the novel.

"The Road to Damascus" was never, I believe, a "best seller." I doubt if those who gauge literary success by

the bargain counters in the dry-goods stores ever heard of the book. Yet I have no hesitation in calling it the finest novel of social import written by an American woman in recent times. I use the phrase "social" now in the larger sense of human society, not of this or that province of fashionable manners.

This was one of those rare books proving that all is not hopelessly chaff in the field of American fiction. Even Gertrude Atherton has become so much an expatriate, and her work so much concerned itself with international comparisons, that she could never be classed as an American writing about Americans. "The Road to Damascus" was the one book that, coming into that classification, redeemed the melancholy average.

Despondent enough one had grown in contemplation of that average. One fell time and again into the notion that only from abroad would ever come the occasional artistic achievement; always, just as one was at the last gasp of optimism, something turned up. Were one not eternally counting on that inevitable turn of the tide; were not judgment—foolishly misnamed pessimism—constantly ripe for sentencing so that one's store of spontaneous enthusiasm be not used up too easily—do you suppose one could have continued so long spying out the land for our reading public? A confirmed pessimist has no business in the critical office, no more than has a confirmed optimist. The former so wastes his censure that when a really supreme call comes for it he has nothing out of the usual to offer; the latter makes eulogy so cheap that when honest need for it arrives his praise sounds no louder than when, as is his constant habit, he is merely echoing the advertising phrases of the publisher.

Here, then, was an oasis in the dry desert of American fiction. A book that furnished refreshment more lasting than the reading of new novels usually gives. Of this sort of pleasure there are many varieties. One may

come upon a new turn of plot; one may find a bold, or a precious turn of style; or one may come upon a new character. In all these discoveries there is charm; but the keenest comes, perhaps, at finding an addition to the gallery of pleasant portraits one has in one's library. No matter how large one's reading, that gallery of favorites is never too large.

It has not been given to all authors to leave behind them heirs to dwell in posterity's memory. This author has left a style; that one is recalled as the pioneer of an 'ism; another is remembered for the accuracy of his or her parochial details; another for a fecundity of invention. But those who have left us memorable characters are the fewest of all. Time, too, weeds ruthlessly in this field. Are there not already those who declare *Henry Esmond* a bore, and that there are distinct odors of old fogeyism about *Colonel Newcome*? Who, then, can say that any character in our contemporary fiction may outlive the enthusiasm of the moment? To prophesy is to give hostages to fortune. Yet, if one have in criticism no courage for blame, or for praise, or even prophecy, why write at all?

The impersonal manner in criticism, the manner of Matthew Arnold, carries no conviction to the people of to-day. It is a question either of infecting the public with one's own enthusiasm, or making them accept the justice of one's censure. It is all a matter of personal opinion. "This is the way it seems to me"—that is, after all, the only conclusion to which any conscientious critic can reasonably come. No matter how much the would-be impersonal critics befog their words by clinging to academic tenets and standards, they never succeed in setting forth anything more than their own opinions. If one has chosen to cloud one's primal temperament with the stored thought of others and of other ages, it is merely the lens of one's mind that is changed; the voiced opinion is still but that of the critic behind the voice.



If, then, I declare that "The Road to Damascus" is a book, and contains a character, worthy of long life, I set forth the opinion and the prophesy of but one fallible mortal. Mindful of field upon field of broken idols, of shattered enthusiasms, and changed moods, I make that declaration. The character of *Richarda*, in this book, is one of the finest ever drawn by an American woman; the book itself has perhaps the broadest view of life that has been shown on our side of the water.

Arresting as is the mere story in this book, and daring as are both the premises and the conclusions of the plot, it is always the splendid tolerance of human frailties that constitutes its claim to be considered superior to the millions of novels that describe life as we pretend it is, or as we pretend it should be. Here is a writer who sees life, sees men and women, as they are, not as centuries of literature have pretended they are. This story is of to-day, and it is of all time. At base, humanity has always been the same. Surroundings only have changed. Observe what one memorable character, Maxwell, the professor at a college for co-education, is made to say:

"The advancing prices and complexities of modern living are probably more productive of many effects which have the appearance of an increased morality, than the national domestic virtue on which we are apt to plume ourselves. Man is compelled to be a monogamist by lack of the conditions which would admit of his being a polygamist."

Is not that just as if it had come wholesale out of Machiavelli? Will you dispute that the essential human being differs much, on Manhattan Island to-day, from the Florentine under the Medicis? If you will, all the more reason why you should read "The Road to Damascus." I take it for granted that you have not; if you had, one would not have heard so many worse books more talked about. Fortunately the prattle of to-day does

not assure the fame that posterity may remark. This was a book not to prattle about, but to be thankful for. Thankfulness in this case is mine, not only for the book's intrinsic merits, but that it enables me to leave, without too bitter a taste in the mind, the whole subject of what our ladies have done for literature. This book proved that, despite much evidence to the contrary, great thought and great art could spring from an American woman.

The central story of the book was without any special American feature. It was the story of a young wife who, when it is proved to her that another woman's boy should call her own husband father, adopts that boy without ever letting her husband know what child he is. Than the beautiful wisdom of *Richarda*, that young wife, there has been nothing much finer done. The canvas of this book is small, but all the character strokes are firm; there are no mistakes of taste; and the underlying philosophy is one that passes the boundaries of conventions and creeds old or new.

Not only is *Richarda* wise beyond what one had hoped was humanly possible; she is tender and lovable; the scenes between her and the adopted boy, *Jack*, are true to all that is best in the love of women. Rarely, indeed, has a woman approached so delicate a problem and so briefly, boldly cut it; I do not recall, in all this book, a single error of art or of taste. Magnificent as is the task *Richarda* sets herself—to bring up that boy, yet keep the father ignorant of her knowledge of his sin—there is never a moment when in thought or word or deed she is that pestiferous creature, the female prig. The only fault that may be found with her, indeed, is that she is too perfect; after contact with her marvellous mixture of sense and sensibility one comes into intercourse with the average human being with too sharp a realisation of average humanity's imperfections. That they are a little too fine, all the characters in this book, is the only count one could conceivably bring against it; yet to bring it

would be to deny that mankind has in it as much fine clay as it has coarse.

Where the book is essentially American is in its exposition of the fallacy of the co-education of the sexes. This is to all intents a typically American theory, that the sexes can learn the fundamentals of wisdom side by side. To expose the fallacy of that argument took no little courage. In "The Road to Damascus" are no philippics, no floods of passionate special pleading; we have, once again, the Machiavellian manner; the facts are left to speak for themselves. A typical instance of what happens in one of those institutions where budding manhood and womanhood are supposed to live and learn together in entire oblivion of the sexual stir is told in this book so vividly that no sermon could have had as powerful a lesson in it. I need quote but a little to prove how little the matter of co-education is minced in this book:

"For of such was the freedom accorded to co-educated man and maid at Waverley. To insinuate that danger might inhere in such latitude of propinquity, would have been regarded as casting a slur upon the morals of American youth, and as the deplorable indication of a transatlantic looseness of character. The importunity of sex might operate dangerously among peoples bound to be born with uncertain virtue; it was otherwise in a land where boys and girls were brought up upon those respectable ideals which ignored the possibility in themselves of what should decently be classed as abnormal tendencies.

"But Betty Carter could have told the sage innocents who undertook to operate a university on a kindergarten system, a few truths in regard to the nature of the babes in its care which would have shocked them immeasurably. The Dean of Waverley also could have added materially to her evidence, but he remained non-committal behind his invariable smile. For if the people of the State preferred co-education on this wide-open plan for their sons and daughters—so be it. When a girl rashly shot herself—well, a certain number

of girls must shoot themselves annually, in deference to statistical demands. It was not to be supposed that rules and regulations determining the limits of youthful freedom could avail against laws as fixed as the setting of the sun.

"Laissez faire! That was the true American spirit, and besides, it was not your daughter."

Superlatives should, by now, stink in the nostrils of the critic who deserves the name; they have been so abused by the press. For years there was a very fury, in American newspapers, to see who could shout the loudest adjectives in praise of the newest book. Judicious folk came to avoid whatever was heralded as the "best selling," the "most brilliant," or the "most absorbing"; wherever, indeed, a superlative was used, one felt distaste. Superlatives were so indiscriminately used that they came to mean nothing at all. Of superlatives, then, about "The Road to Damascus" I must be chary, even though, in my own case as critic, the vice of futile exaggeration has been pretty well avoided. You will not, I believe, contend that in the main my opinion of our American women novelists has shown high. In making H. A. Mitchell Keays's book the exception to prove the vicious and inartistic rule I should be emphasising my point sufficiently. Her work was the one ray of pure light; her sex has debased our literature and our taste for it; it has flushed us with either the sexual or the too ladylike; but in "The Road to Damascus" you will find the art that is greater than sex. The other American women whom I have chosen to praise were, in their life and their literature, cosmopolitan rather than American; the author of "The Road to Damascus" has remained, so far, an American.

And remains, therefore, the one exception in my indictment of the evil influence the American woman has exerted upon our literature.

Farewell, then, to the ladies! They had their little

day, the day when people spoke of the age of the woman novelist. What they did with that day I have tried to tell you. How they debased the true coin of letters, how they befouled the fiction of a decade, you have seen by my foregoing pages. What they accomplished for good weighed but lightly in the balance; but I have tried to give it all possible credit. If I have not gone more deeply into the merely bread-and-butter contributions they made to American literature, it was because examination of their positive influences for evil was quite painful enough, without considering them negatively.

Except in casual reference, you are to have no more now of the ladies. Their chapter is closed. Already, like the world, they have been too much with us; the air is a trifle heavy from them. As gallantly as we could we gave them precedence. If now we leave them, we would do it as politely as possible. For what we have received from them, I trust I have shown my thankfulness. If I have not mentioned this or that lady, I trust she will let me know; if we both live, and this book with us; there may yet, in future editions, be opportunity to amend my error. At any rate I have done my best to make plain the share the dear ladies have had in our literary education,—in bringing us to that highly enviable state of public taste that has fashioned our literature into—what it is,

We must leave them, true, but we cannot forget them. In absence still we may think of them, of what they have done for us. See them stand there, as we regretfully bid them farewell; each with a “best seller” in her hand! One has desecrated child-birth; another has played pervert with a legless male; one has reveled in sluttishness, and another only in snobbishness. Some have debauched their sex; most of them have sinned against art. They stand there still unashamed;

Under the bludgeonings of—me,  
Their heads are bloody, but unbowed,



because there is just one thing that will ever really bring surcease to their pernicious activities. That would be when the public stopped buying their books.

Though we bid them farewell, perhaps there is still something we can do to find if, towards the art of literature, the stir of shame is possible in them. We can point out, as contrast to what the ladies achieved in social history, what the writers of the other sex did in that field. That done, we can come to those fellow-criminals of the ladies, namely, the critics, and show how, between them, has been reached that condition wherein American fiction is a commercial industry, not an art.

With that promise, then—to think of them a little, though no longer specifically engaged with them—

Ladies—Your Humble Servant!

PART TWO  
MEN AND MANNERS



## CHAPTER ONE

IF in this age of the woman novelist the most astounding achievements in stories of sex were by women, as has been shown, in the fiction of contemporary manners, where shamelessness was not to count, their score was pitifully small compared to that earned by the other sex. The most passing glance at some of the Englishmen who wrote novels of manners in that period, should prove my assertion. Both in the quality of their art, and in the value of their chronicles of contemporary life, they were the superiors of the women writers. To choose but a few, those that have most appealed to me were Robert Hichens, E. F. Benson, Richard Pryce, and John Galsworthy.

The work of all these, individually and collectively, has suggested much that is pertinent to the present argument. No writer of either sex has so mirrored in English the life and heart of a national character as has John Galsworthy. Save in French such delicate handling of a dangerous detail as was in "The Successor" is not to be found in recent fiction; to compare that work with such sex stuff as I began my book with is to compare the razor with the shillelagh. Hichens has written a series of social studies that deserve, inasmuch as they chronicle not only a certain side of modern social England, but his own growth as artist, careful critical attention. "Dodo" Benson has offered a series, almost as long as that of Hichens, of stories that have been remarkable examples of how, with genuine talent, it is yet possible to be ridiculous. I thought fit to include him, not only because of his very real achievements, but in order to keep in countenance that galaxy of ladies from which with such regret we lately tore ourselves away.

Against these, we have in America the work only of men like Robert Chambers, Graham Phillips, and Winston Churchill, who, as chroniclers of the life about us, can at best be said to be making a good beginning.

Neither Englishman nor American, but something of both, is Henry James. Him we are to consider last.

It is the career of Robert Hichens I would ask you to note first.

For some years it looked as if Hichens might become the victim of his too great cleverness. In his earlier books there was the fatal gift of too much humor; the irony in "The Green Carnation" and "The Londoners" and "The Slave" was approached, in America, only by the work of Edgar Saltus and the author of "The Imitator." What happened to Mr. Saltus we have already seen. As to the other book, I have in my possession documentary evidence of the number of American publishers who thought the book "too clever." It afforded lively proof of the profit, in American literature, of being dull.

Dullness, Mr. Hichens never achieved. It was always brilliance, in matter and in manner, that he gave us.

Coming into our ken first with "The Green Carnation," a sparkling satire posed as a key-novel, Mr. Hichens made more than one essay into that field of the fleshly phrase which so fully occupied the ladies to whom I devoted the first part of my book. "The Green Carnation" burlesqued the Oscar Wilde period of English estheticism as keenly as did Gilbert & Sullivan's operetta of "Patience"; it belongs in the history of that movement. Almost every character in the story had its obvious, notorious original; many of the epigrams or paradoxes were as clever as those of Wilde himself. The personality of Wilde, the fashionable pose he typified, and even the prose he worked in, were hit off in "The Green Carnation" to the life and letter.

It was in "Flames" that Mr. Hichens made his bold-



est venture into the suggestive. In sheer brilliance he surpassed anything that the shameless sex had done; unfortunately he was not far behind them in his efforts to be, in print, as wicked as possible. It was characteristic of the trend of Mr. Hichens' mind at that time that his greatest artistic success in "Flames" was the description of *Cuckoo Bright*, a horizontally minded young woman whose forte was Piccadilly Circus. Most of the other characters in the story were but dummies clothed in glittering syllables; clear and human was only the delineation of this member of the Oldest Profession—as Kipling insists. Until Margarethe Boehme wrote the German book already considered, *Cuckoo Bright* was the farthest step that had been made in that direction.

Mr. Hichens's whole mental attitude, at that time, adapted itself to the various unpleasant colors on the canvas of this book. His language and his similes were those of one who looked at life from the pose of utter depravity. He spoke of the relation between youth and life as a "liaison," and called orchids the "Messalinas of the hot-house." Though he was by no means first in adapting the synonyms of fleshliness,—since the gentleman who called Offenbach's music a *cocotte* had been dead a long time,—he excelled, in the luxuriance of his vice-tainted phrases, anything accomplished by his rivals of the other sex. If he had not in his later work proved his place as a serious artist, as well as a facile writer, he would have fallen through "Flames" into as despicable a case as the feminists I have cited.

Aside from its phraseology, "Flames" was elaborate burlesque, and it was only in the spirit of burlesque that the critic could treat it. So to treat it, to-day, has its value; it proves how too much humor, too great brilliance, too facile a trick in paradox, can hinder rather than help the career of a literary artist.

*Valentine Cresswell*, in "Flames," was the saint of

Victoria Street. Also he was like an ivory statue, had the melodies of wandering organs singing in his ascetic ears, and a habit of becoming serious toward midnight. This habit I cannot too fiercely condemn. The case of *Mr. Cresswell* should be a perpetual warning beacon. Although there was a time when *Valentine* was not on speaking terms with love, hate, despair, desire or any other emotion—in his ivory statue state, in fact—his habit of becoming serious toward midnight brought him to a point where he asked himself why he should be like “a bird hovering over it all” instead of being “in it.” After that, it is to be recorded that he began to be distinctly in it, though still—nay, all the more, deserving the name of “a bird.” The actual transition was by way of spiritualistic sittings. *Valentine*, after much midnight brooding, had become convinced that he was tired of being so utterly good, so untempted, and that it might be splendid to change souls with *Julian*, a stalwart young friend of his, who had a fashion of lying about in “an unbuttoned attitude.” Mr. Hichens attempted to show that *Julian* was an entirely good young man who had once been otherwise, and been saved by the ivory example of *Valentine*. But for my part I had my suspicions the moment I read of his unbuttoned attitudes. They may be exciting, but they are not in good taste. So there need have been no surprise over the change that came to *Julian* after the sittings.

There were four of these sittings. At first there was nothing noteworthy, except that the curtain moved and the dog howled. But neither Sorosis nor Mrs. Eddy would think that anything wonderful. It was at the fourth that things began to happen; *Valentine* fell into a trance. As he awoke from it, his friend, *Julian*, observed a small flame wandering forth from him, and escaping with a slight cry. Whereupon the dog also abruptly left *Valentine's* embrace. I could not blame that dog. The sight

and sound of a flame issuing from the person chosen as a divan is not helpful to quiescence. How was the dog to know it was *Valentine's* soul that had so fared forth? Only Mr. Hichens knew that.

Yes, it was *Valentine's* soul, was that little flame, and its place in the soul business was taken by the soul of a person named *Marr*, conveniently dead, as to the body, at that precise moment. *Marr* had suggested the sittings, and was otherwise an abominable person. Therewith began the dominance of *Marr's* soul, through *Valentine's* body, over *Julian*. The latter continued his habit of seeing flames. He met *Cuckoo Bright*, whose hat yelled, when it did not happen to be merely crying out, and he saw a flame in her eyes. That flame was the soul of *Valentine* looking for a home. *Julian* did not know that when he saw it, but we had Mr. Hichens' word for it. *Miss Bright*, strange to say, in spite of the fact that "a shrill scent of cherry-blossoms ran with her like a crowd"—an accompaniment that I should think likely to frighten even the hardiest of male creatures!—was destined to be the influence for good over *Julian*.

Still, even in spite of the flame in *Cuckoo's* eyes, *Julian*, following the guidance of the new *Valentine*, managed to be a pretty weird specimen of the utterly depraved. After continued association with the new, perverted edition of *Valentine*—merely an elaborated *Dorian Grey*—*Julian* "had acquired such a taste for low company that he ought to have been born a peer." The color of his face became that of a misty cloud. The misty cloud, in faces, is fatal. And so, though *Cuckoo* prayed for him, and fought for him, *Julian* was doomed. His descent began the day that *Valentine*, *Cuckoo* and he went to the Empire, to watch the ballet, and take part in the promenading. It was evidently not during the consulship of Mrs. Ormiston Chant, for during their walk "an elderly woman with yellow hair and a fat-lined

face enveloped him in her skirts of scarlet and black striped silk." Of course, *Julian* never recovered from that; he never came out of the mud again. Considering what had enveloped him, can we wonder? He went surely down hill, became what nice people call horrid, and died fighting against becoming worse.

That was at another sitting. There were *Valentine*, *Julian*, *Dr. Leveillier*, and *Cuckoo*. The doctor was a famous nerve-specialist, who treated the "sane lunatics of society," the lunatics who turn "love into an adulterous sensation." Still, the doctor was a pretty good chap; he had become interested in the flame business; and the flame business was going strong that day. The flame of the real *Valentine* hovered about *Julian* all during the sitting, while *Marr*, in the body of *Valentine*, was doing its flamingest to enter into the body of *Julian*. *Julian* saved the day by dying, and the scene closed with the spectacle of the flames of *Valentine* and *Julian* soaring skyward, hand in hand, as it were, while the body of *Valentine*, polite to the last, crumbled softly to ashes. *Cuckoo* and the doctor remained alive. That was something to be glad of. *Cuckoo* was a person who had suffered much, who had walked many thousands of miles over the stones of Piccadilly, and who, though she was badly made up, consumptively rouged and had hair that was dreadfully dyed, was still more bearable than the two male figures that flickered about these pages.

Considered seriously, "*Flames*" remains interesting enough in marking the artistic progress of its author. It was brilliant continuously, though often unpleasantly. Its transference of souls theory has been employed by many living novelists: brushing aside such buncombe as Corelli's "*Ziska*," there is Mr. Benson's "*Image in the Sand*," to which reference will be made later, and the anonymously issued "*The Imitator*." The latter came most closely to Mr. Hichens's story of jumping souls, as

also it most closely approached the satire and the caricature in "The Green Carnation."

To the "Green Carnation" manner Mr. Hichens returned in "The Londoners." He had determined, evidently, to escape completely from the semi-mysticism of "Flames," and hark back to the flippant manner in which he first wrote of London society. In "The Londoners" he achieved a frivolity and a grotesqueness that approached the manner of a cynical showman exhibiting the paces of a number of locoed broncos. It was as if he had determined, in his own words, already quoted from "Flames," to treat of "the sane lunatics of society." The story was so fantastic as to be farce rather than fiction. Once irritation at the foolishness of the farce was over, we had to allow that the book was full of amusing situations and amazing caricatures.

The most bearable of all this lunatic company was *Mrs. Verulam*. Though she was the fashion, the favorite of all London, she was dying to escape from society; she likened herself to a squirrel turning in its cage; she wanted a taste of the country. So we have the house party at Ribton Marshes, where we can verily fancy ourselves in the politest ward of the insanest asylum. A Bun Emperor had vacated Ribton Marshes for *Mrs. Verulam*. All the people in this party revolved in a glare of foolery that proved the author unwilling to take London society seriously. The six detectives whom the Bun Emperor had distributed about his place to keep his property from being destroyed or stolen; the rustic temporarily adored of *Mrs. Verulam* because he smacked so strongly of the soil; these were but mildly amusing; but such a picture as that of *Lady Drake* and the penny-in-the-slot machine was not easily seen without laughter. Trying to quench her nocturnal appetite she engaged in a bout with this machine, one of the Bun Emperor's pets, and was found, finally, "seated on the floor in an Eastern



position, attired in an Indian shawl, with her lap full of cigars, brandy balls, coppers, luggage labels, boxes of pills, sticks of chocolate, rolls of curl papers, pear-drops and sealing-wax."

To do Mr. Hichens justice, he did for London society in that book what has never been done for New York in any well-known novel. ("The Imitator," as has been pointed out, was never sufficiently known.) He boldly, smilingly lampooned it, yet one could see the likeness through the caricature. His dialogue, his tone, his surface glitter, denoted an observation of, and an immersion in, his subject, such as few had attempted on either side of the Atlantic. Clyde Fitch, in the first act of "The Moth and the Flame," came nearest to "The Londoners," but his picture of society in a mood of fantastic frolic was nothing like so clever as Mr. Hichens's. The account of the affairs at the Unattached Club, where a lecture on the Holy Land was given in a darkness that allowed everyone to hear everyone's else remarks about themselves, and all the newcomers to sit down unwittingly in the laps of the ladies, was a delicious bit of satire. The figure of *Ingerstall*, the artist, with his everlasting appeal to the superiority of France in everything, was equally memorable. Do we not know that pose? In our parlor-cars, our steamers *de luxe*, have we not observed that attitude until we sicken?

Something of what is best in raillery shines from the passage in which *Ingerstall* takes *Bush*, the countryman, among the roundabouts (in American: merry-go-rounds) at Ascot:

"He has the artistic sense; he understands the exquisite poetry of vulgarity; the inwardness of the cocoanut-shy, the extraordinary elements of the picturesque which appear in the staring face of Madame Aunt Sally, open-mouthed to receive the provender shot at her by Hodge and Harriet. He knows well the bizarre and beautiful effect upon the nervous

system of that strange combination of the arts of music and motion—the rundabout. He——”

“The rundabout?” interrupted the Duchess.

“Didn’t I say so?”

“You’ve been riding?” said the Duke to Mr. Bush. “Good exercise—good for the liver! Good for the muscles! Did you ever get a decent horse?”

Mr. Bush burst forth into a loud guffaw.

“Splendid animal!” cried Mr. Ingerstall. “I rode a pink, he a delicate—a really very delicate-apple-green with sulphur-colored spots. The music was that extremely pathetic composition, ‘Write Me a Letter from Home.’ I should have preferred ‘Quand Les Amoureux S’En Vent Deux Par Deux.’ Still, the other did really very well. After dismounting—Bush was thrown by the way—we spent half an hour in a tent with the bottle-imp. Paris would like it. And then we pressed on to the two-faced lady, ending up with a cocoanut-shy which Whistler would love to paint. I really never enjoyed an Ascot so much—never!”

The fun poked by Mr. Hichens at the moneyed invaders of town and country fashion in England was both entertaining and instructive, marking, as it did, a period before cosmopolitanism and dollars had come to be taken for granted in London. He was still fluent in paradox and epigram; his personages all somewhat too clever in their conversation. Reading Hichens was like eating game when it is high.

The coruscant chatter in “The Londoners” and the posturings in “The Green Carnation” were vividly recalled in many pages of that finer and larger story “The Slave.” The talk that obtained at *Lady St. Ormyn’s* garden-party at Epsom was such talk as only Mr. Hichens had ever given us. Yet sparkling as Mr. Hichens’s manner of treating the fashionable and frivolous Londoners was, the discriminating reader knew his brilliant insincerity to be a deliberate phase of art; he

was giving us, as nearly as possible, the actual voice and thought of the average creature in that set which for a decade or so England and America conspired to call "smart."

That phase of Mr. Hichens's art reached its highest point in "The Slave." Obviously exaggerated as some of his scenes, and speeches, and persons, were, he here proved himself one of the writers from whose pages the future historian can construct again that century-end Society. Primarily, the story was of music and jewels. Music and jewels—surely few things have ever more appealed to the senses of our fashionables. To gauge the curious sensuousness with which the souls of some of us cling to the glamour of music and of jewels; to give, even to complete slavishness at the feet of those idols, a mystic charm and a never tiring fascination—to do this was to be at once a true artist and a nice judge of the social firmament and its tastes. Who can deny that about music and jewels once centred the interest of our society? The Opera was the fashion, and singers were the fashion; to the Opera one must come sparkling with jewels; round and about those intermingling attractions flitted and fluttered a swarm of social moths and butterflies. Even the newspapers recognised the value of gems and their ownership; nothing was supposed to appeal more directly to the proletariat's romantic aspirations than the news that Mrs. Hyphenblank had lost her diamonds, or that the great Spanish ruby had been sold to the wife of an oil or beer millionaire; or that such and such an actress wore a bushel or so of brilliants in her famous falling-up stairs scene.

This canvas in "The Slave" showed the centre of our English-speaking society stirred equally by music and by jewels; it vividly sketches the whole social attitude toward the Opera and toward singers; it was colored throughout with a fine and rational art; and it had both the composition that made a telling total, and the care

for detail that denoted an amateur of miniature. The impression the book made was powerful. The author lured us most effectively into appreciating *Lady Caryll's* inhuman passion for jewels. To say that such an obsession is impossible is to lack faith in the infinite possibilities of the human senses. The skill with which Mr. Hichens introduced her passion for gems; the delicate gradations with which he disclosed, more and more sharply, the absolute slave she was—all brought us to realisation that her madness was no more grotesque than the madness of many another woman for a man. If we could not consider *Lady Caryll* as purely human, it was only because in many of the highest efflorescences of an aristocracy there is ever a touch of the inhuman. Equally inhuman seemed *Sir Reuben*, the wizened little semi-Oriental whom *Lady Caryll* married for the sake of the jewels he could give her. Not even Mr. Marion Crawford's *Mr. Isaacs* was more armored with all the romantic glamour of jewels. Through the mouth of *Sir Reuben* Mr. Hichens gave us the very essence of the poetry in precious stones. Few women can have read those pages in "The Slave" without comprehending something of that passion which ruled *Lady Caryll*.

It was to jewels that *Lady Caryll* was a slave, and so gave title to the book; but in the main canvas music was an equally dominant note. It was round about the subject of Opera—Opera, ballad-singers, fashionable pianists, and fashionable adoration of them all—that most of the social caricatures in "The Slave" centred. "London women," Mr. Hichens told us, "love the impudence of fat little foreigners who can sing and who are famous." Mr. Hichens had once been a critic of music; he knew what he was talking about; and he never talked more brilliantly. If ever there was doubt as to the real reason why society favored the Opera, "The Slave" must have dispelled it. The crowd of fashionables who prattled of music and musicians in those pages; the singers who used

their art merely as means to the end of sensuous victories—all these were slaves to their senses, and were the debauchees of music. If George Moore had given us in "Evelyn Innes" a wonderful picture of a singer and her attitude toward her art; if he gave us page on page of valuable elucidation of the history and mystery of early English music; no less did Mr. Hichens set down definitely the attitude of English society toward music and its makers. Mr. Moore had no humor; Mr. Hichens perhaps too much; yet that even his veriest nonsense was delicious, as his description of a set musicale, few would care to deny. And just as in "Flames" we had, amid the other absurdities, many fine pages about certain sides and scenes of London as it was at the close of the 19th century, so in "The Slaves" we had many vivid scenes from London life "during the fashionable two months and a half of the year."

The fashionables of New York must have recognised their own attitude toward music, and their own foibles, in these sketches; for they did not differ essentially from London. Some of the society's pets were caricatured broadly; these caricatures belong to the history of our time. Mme. Melba was there, drawn to the life. *Lady St. Ormyn*, who listened "violently"; who always had "an opera box close to the stage, so that she could beck and nod to the singers, and ask them to lunch when they were kissing their hands before the curtain; and to whom noise, of the Wagner species, "gave an agreeable sensation in the small of the back"—did we not know her well? *Lady De Gray*, or *Hilda Higgins*, or a blend of both, had been the London original of *Lady St. Ormyn*; New York was easily able to name an original also. Then there was *Monsieur Anneau*, "very tall, very broad, with a dyed beard and fevered eyes," who sang about God and about flowers, but always meant a woman; and of whom *Lady Caryll* said, to his face, that he and the Bon Dieu had not even a bowing acquaintance. Do we not



know him? Pol Plancon, beloved in the Metropolitan and in polite drawing-rooms, was the original of half of that blend; the virility and the love o' women of Victor Maurel completed the portrait. *Barré* was the composer Faure; and *Bredelli* "the fat little foreigner," who said "Give me the women and I have the world" was Tosti the song-writer.

Through its tinsel of scintillant speech, and its gay caricatures, this story of "The Slave" was a vigorous arraignment of modern society. In sheer brilliance, in biting social satire, Mr. Hichens never surpassed it. Few other writers of our time ever equaled it.

Not until Mr. Hichens wrote "The Garden of Allah" did his art completely find itself.

High as hopes of him might have been, strong as was the memory of his best pages, never had we been led to expect such a gem as this. Too often the fatal gift of humor had twisted his early work awry; the fine pity that marked his sketch of *Cuckoo* in "Flames" did not atone for the fantastic absurdities that marked that book as an entity. All his books had marked his power over English prose; most of them had been fairly successful, by the world's reckoning; but most of them had failed in reaching beyond a certain level. "The Garden of Allah" touched a level of excellence of its own; it branded its author as perilously near genius.

The paramount passion, love, had been but faintly sung in English prose. The French can point to more than one masterpiece wherein music and color joined before that shrine which in Anglo-Saxon artists had induced little save timidity. But in English——! Memory went tapping about among the well-laid ghosts of the lightly living figments that had marked the English novel during the last generation; the faintest, most fragmentary echoes responded. A page here had raised hopes; a chapter elsewhere spurred expectation; none went beyond the dream; fulfilled completely the fleeting promise. Until

Mr. Hichens wrote "The Garden of Allah" the possibilities of our language in artistically reproducing the poetry and the pity in the greatest of human passions had been but faintly realised.

A considerable assertion, yet, to my mind, incontestible. You must go back to the great Frenchman who conceived "A Passion in the Desert," or to that still living French lieutenant who wrote a "Book of Pity and of Death," for anything akin to this achievement. Huysmans, Flaubert and Loti, all strangely dissimilar, yet strangely related, had put quivering pages upon our memories; I recall those vivid chapters of George Moore's about the singer who became a nun—that, too, was Huysmans filtered past Philistia!—and that delightful filigree John Oliver Hobbes wrought about the childhood of *Robert Orange*; but nothing in English had been so splendid in its color, so potent in its passion, so perfect in its sway over the reader, as "The Garden of Allah." Here was English prose written with the poetry of passion, as well as with the passion of poetry; yet nothing was farther from that fatal thing: prose poetry. It was prose that so conveyed details as to start the thought: Why, this is realism, naturalism, veritism! and then to fling that thought aside as ridiculously inadequate to convey a notion of the vigorous impressionism in color and music which swept this romance and its minutest iotas upon our intelligence.

The Desert of Sahara, that was the Garden of Allah. It was to the desert that the vital personages in this romance came, seeking peace, forgetfulness, passion and health; and finding them all. The plot—the details in which I need not now revive—was the plot of passion; from one crescendo we rose to another; wooing, wedding, and final revelation were all merged in splendid coherence. The magic of the desert held the reader bound; the mystery in the passionate plot was one with that magic. The human passion and the passion and peace of the

desert fused and blended, until the reader felt something akin to exhaustion when the book was over and done with. We had walked with one who flung the colors of an Arnold Boecklin and a Jonas Lie—the painter, not the writer—upon his canvas. We had heard the symphony of the desert, a symphony that closed with magnificent courage upon a note of passionate renunciation. We had been in the enchantment of the East.

The call of the East assuredly came strongly to Mr. Hichens. Following that call he brought noble gifts home. Something of what is older than the oldest of the Arabian Nights mingled with what is most modern in the cry for that East “where the best is like the worst.” He painted the desert for us, its magic, its passion and its solitude, so that one doubts if it can ever be done again. The desert villages, with their cafés, their dancers, their self-torturing fanatics, their sand-diviners—who tell the future as it spills from the grains of sand—and their “alleys of women”; we could note everything vividly and exactly. Everywhere was the keen vision of realism, yet everywhere the poetry of passion. The desert by day, in a hundred changing aspects of beauty and of brass; the desert by night; at every moment of the sun and moon and stars. Always and everywhere the desert; always and everywhere, passion. The desert was the garden of Allah; and we came to know all that garden’s paths. Passion, faith, religion, all swayed to the dominion of the desert. We saw it mightier than the sea, mightier than the Past or the Future. We succumbed to its spell.

That, waiving the plot of human passion which moved through the book, was the triumph of “The Garden of Allah.” Picture upon picture one could quote, painting the manifold moods and powers of the desert; yet, shorn of their settings, these would be but poor gems by which to judge this brilliant achievement. I can but ask you—if you are so unfortunate as never to have read the book

—to believe that, by the magic of a fine artist, we were transported to a land of vivid, glaring colors and passions. All modern civilisation was made to seem far in the background; those were what the travelers had wished to escape. These splendid spaces of sand, of sun, of violence yet of peace, of fatefulness and of solitude; these were the things they had come to find. Upon page after page Mr. Hichens poured the sparkle and glow of color and music, until we realised the sway which sheer beautiful writing can exert. Not for a moment do I mean the vicious anomaly called "fine writing." No, this was real magic; carrying us into the secret heart of the desert; and proving to us how slightly we care about the actual action in a story if the magician be potent enough.

The note of passion was throbbing, pulsing, singing everywhere, as passion had seldom sung through English prose. That passion made, too, for great drama. The scene wherein *Androwsky*, minded to take train and set himself beyond *Domini* and temptation, came up through the garden of *Count Anteoni*, murmuring his farewells to all the flowers and all the walks; saw *Domini* sitting there, and from "I came to say good-bye" passed to "I love you," was a scene so instinct with the magic, tangible yet illusory, of the theatre, that I have never been able to see how our *hommes de Theatre* have so long passed it by. Surely the scenic artist, as well as the players, would be given great moments in that scene. An equally splendid passage was that of the wedding-night. Great drama and great prose. If one had been in the habit of thinking such matters purely French provinces, Mr. Hichens proved otherwise.

Over all, in this book, was the dominance of religious devotion. Faith throbbed with passion; passion with faith. There was not a line of orthodoxy in the book. Yet many, whether pagan, Trappist, Arab, Mohammed-

dan, or Christian, might take firmer hold on their gods after reading "The Garden of Allah." Yet to suggest any purpose at all in this book is to diminish praise. I think Mr. Hichens had no purpose in writing it, save the purpose of all great art, expression. "The Garden of Allah" was indeed great art, greatly expressed.

Mr. Hichens never reached that height again. His art there touched its maximum. He might well have laid his pen down then and there; had he not written one fine book? What he did afterwards never—so far, at any rate—approached that story of the desert in effectiveness. He tried often enough, afterwards, to lead us again into passion's garden of enchantment; too often, however, one heard but feeble echoes of notes once sweet, and heard the crackling of thorns under a boiling pot.

In "The Call of the Blood" and "A Spirit in Prison," for instance, he tried again to pass on to us something of the Orient's impassioned color. He showed, again, the sun in dominance; but the blue sea and sky of Sicily instead of the desert's glare. Here, under the shadow of Etna, we were asked to watch the sun drawing forth the Sicilian soul dormant in the body of an apparently English youth. On the text, "Our blood governs us when the time comes," one story was builded. Instead of the desert's garden of Allah we had the pastoral beauties of Sicily; desire, and the yielding to it, transformed that garden of paradise into a field as tragic and as bare as was the African desert at close of the earlier story. Tragedy of renouncement as "The Garden of Allah" was, we left it, not only surcharged with its passion, but uplifted by its faith. In "The Call of the Blood," brilliant as were the hues in which the victories of the South, of the sun, were painted for us, they held nothing at all of hope. The passion that was denied in the garden of Allah, purely pagan though it was, still seemed to give



promises to our optimism; in the later spectacle of the tragic triumph of a man's blood we saw only the most relentless, most Oriental, most hopeless of philosophies.

In brilliance we have, in America, no novelist who approached Mr. Hichens. Neither "The Slave" nor "The Garden of Allah" have been equaled on this side of the Atlantic. The one, as a specimen of social caricature; the other, of really artistic prose.

The case of Mr. Hichens, finally, is pertinent to one of my fundamental arguments, namely that our American productivity makes for everything save fine art. Professor William James has asserted that without too much we cannot have enough of anything, and that the production of what he termed—doubtless with unintentional colloquialism—"lots" of inferior books was a condition of the few precious specimens being realised. That assertion can never be sufficiently rebuked; to prove it mistaken in premise and conclusion is one of the reasons for my writing this book. Our spread of superficial education in America has brought us to a point where you cannot throw a stone without hitting a novelist; yet the search for the real art of writing is more futile than ever before. We have millions of books, and no book; everyone can have books printed, and none has thought it necessary to know how to write. If we pat ourselves on the back because of the abundance of our literary production, we might as well applaud the rabbit. Our professors, of philosophy and statistics, need never grow anxious—not in this generation, at any rate!—lest a lethargy overcome our fecund fictionists; if they, with the ladies, and the newspapers, have their way, we shall eventually be submerged, like Atlantis, under an ocean of ink. Their scorn for the precious in art leads them to keep wide open that gate to literature, which should be kept tight barred against all the fools, women and children, who now cumber the way.

## CHAPTER TWO

THE work of Mr. E. F. Benson, while it has chronologically and in many other ways paralleled that of Mr. Hichens, has always filled the critic with very mixed sensations. Indubitably brilliant, a thorough craftsman in English prose, he has given us a series of novels that irritated as often as they entertained. As a writer, pure and simple, his stature was considerable; as an inventor of plots he has gradually been succumbing to occult influences that may kill him, as artist, as surely as a so-called Christian Science killed what was mortal in Harold Frederic.

At first Mr. Benson was satisfied with social satire. His "Dodo" remains still memorable for its brilliance of dialogue, its paradoxical attitudes, and its caricatures direct from fashionable life in the England of that day. That Dorothy Tennant, afterwards the wife of Henry M. Stanley, was generally considered *Dodo's* original, is well known.

Unfortunately Mr. Benson overplayed his luck. In his later books, which continued the satiric vein of "Dodo," he wearied us as often as he amused us. Paradox that reeks more of machinery than spontaneity is as tiresome as stupidity. To attempt a monotony of brilliance is as dispiriting as to achieve unillumined dulness. When all the smart people in Mr. Benson's books talked in nothing but paradox, and never had any morals save those induced by fashion, the hothouse flavor became rather insupportable. His books were clever; unfortunately, they were little else. And that, for a novelist, is not enough. To be merely clever, in this day and age, is to fail.

One of Mr. Benson's novels called "Mammon & Co." was typical both of his cleverness and his failures. He tried therein to mirror the life, the ways and the speeches of the smartest London set; he tried to disclose the innate heartlessness and shallowness of that set, yet bring his story to an ending that would seem a moral and a warning. He tried to make capital of the Hooley method of bribing peers into posing on the directorates of rotten stock companies; he swept his brush over large spaces—yet he made no impression. His epigrams fell flat; the picture of society was so full of the artist's own insincerity as to lose its tints; and the "good" ending came, for all the world, like a "slump" in the stock market. That Mr. Benson could write was abundantly proven; but he was too full of the merely superficial cynicism induced by the set of society he mirrored; he appealed only to the fashionables and to the females, and not at all to the great human entity. Humanity was rare in his pages. Unbalanced by an equal share of kindness, his satire flashed in countless sparks that were snuffed out and forgotten.

Between those two stools, in fact, Mr. Benson, as novelist, has always fallen: brilliance and bourgeoisie. He labored to shine, until one saw only his laboring. He made his appeal to that feminine section of society whose taste and influence have had such pernicious influence on all our letters; he, who began as a brilliant youth, brilliantly, is now busy attempting conventional melodrama for "the ladies in the boxes."

In "Mammon & Co." there were, however, occasional gleams of entertainment. There was the American matron, *Mrs. Murchison*, an obvious caricature of the fantastic figure that gossip had drawn of Mrs. Leiter. Mr. Benson even went so far as to repeat that ancient libel, in which an inquirer as to whether her daughter is delicate is answered: "Oh, no; she's the most indelicate girl!" Some of the lines in this caricature were funny

enough, as when *Mrs. Murchison*, considering her daughter, dreams to herself: "Some day my darling will go in to dinner before her own mother," and when it is told of her that "to be found dead among a heap of Duchesses would be to her what to a soldier is death in the forefront of the battle." Also, she was never able to get over the habit of saying "Very pleased to make your acquaintance."

A certain unhealthiness of atmosphere that was later to become Mr. Benson's most congenial air could already be marked in "*Mammon & Co.*" He gave a picture of a peer, *Ted Comber*, which was distinctly unwholesome. He took ladies' magazines, did embroidery, and danced beautifully. He went to his hair-dresser's constantly to have grey hairs taken out, and had all the vices without any of the virtues of an old-time beau. That picture of *Comber* is to be remembered in any critical consideration of Mr. Benson; it was the first sketch for the more elaborate portrait of *Beckwith* in "*Paul*," issued several years later. That Mr. Benson should so repeat himself was but one of the many proofs of his artistic decline.

Manifold as were the views of fashionable English life attempted in "*Mammon & Co.*," the book was rank with imperfections. Society's worship at the money shrine was incorporated in the picture; there were descriptions of just such baccarat episodes as the newspapers told of *Tranby Croft*; fashionable morals were exposed as somewhat hideous; yet the book was not a good novel either of the money mania nor of sex problems. Its chief value was in showing, so early in Mr. Benson's career, whither tiresome verbal gymnastics, unwholesome atmosphere and conventional bourgeoisie would eventually bring him.

Never, since then, has Mr. Benson been convincing in his art. Almost every story he gave us was tinged with the occult, in intention; with the ridiculous, in actual effect. He seemed to have made up his mind to supply

the novel-reading public with a human menagerie that would rival Hagenbeck's, to say nothing of Maskelyne & Cook. One fad after another engaged him as a builder of plots; spiritualism, theosophy, Pan and the return to Nature, and others. He covered many hundreds of pages; he did much good writing; and he never succeeded in being anything but artistically absurd.

It was simply impossible to take him seriously.

Consider that curious jumble of the occult and the ridiculous called "The Image in the Sand." Ambitious, and utterly futile. The story was entertaining just where it pretended to be instructive; it had no value in enlarging our notions of the occult for the reason that it made the whole business ridiculous. It tried to give you tragedy, and you found only trouble. The atmosphere of conviction was never there. You allowed Mr. Benson's talent, but you allowed, also, that the book never for an instant impressed you. This story of the occult, of spirits called from the dead past and affecting, for ill or well, the living, moved us no more than the exhibitions of a parlor magician. Maskelyne & Cook, when we were children, used to do the thing much better in the old Egyptian Hall. Despite the pages showing the heroine in travail of soul, devout in communion with the spirit of her dead father, the actual air of make-believe was utterly absent; we saw simply the old, familiar machinery of the spiritualists and table-rappers. Had Mr. Benson treated his material ironically, as Gelett Burgess did in "The Heart Line," this might have been well enough; but he expected us to take all these phenomena and tragedies seriously, and, doing so, became himself a laughing-stock.

Mr. Benson did not even call on his imagination for new devices; he used the stock tricks, treated them with great seriousness, and left us aghast at the poverty of his invention. In this detail, as in all his work since then, he exposed the conventional qualities in his art; that these should exist side by side with his undoubted



brilliance is one of the curiosities of modern literature. Nowhere, in all his occult hocus-pocus, was there hint of irony or satire; we were asked to keep a straight face while the most hackneyed machinery squeaked in front of us. A native Egyptian medium was sent into a trance; nextly, table-rappings, clapping of hands, and rushing of winds accompanied the spirit manifestations. Again, the magic circle in the sand, or wherever else, was used for purposes of safety while the experiments proceeded.

The only departure from the ordinary spiritualistic business behind a curtain, in this story, was the scene of it all being Egypt. The momentous seance, the vital episode, of the book, took place in a sandstorm; otherwise the trappings were of the most dismally conventional. An unpleasant Egyptian of many hundred years ago was entombed in the sand; over that very spot the magic circle was drawn. All were safe, at the critical moment of the experiment, save the heroine, *Ida*, who unwittingly overstepped the circle's edge. There was clapping of hands, a babble of words in a strange tongue, a stale and impure light, and then a hideous form vaporously took shape. As *Ida* approached it took on a hideous leer; the medium was awakened; and the old Egyptian was supposed to be again a straying spirit. Unfortunately it was in *Ida* that he was now straying, squint and all. Whereupon began the tragic battle of *Ida* for her own soul—at least, Mr. Benson would have had us take it tragically.

It was always Benson tragedy, never true tragedy. None of the shibboleths about that scene in the desert moved us; the chatter of black magic and white magic left us cold. The power of *Henderson*, whose love eventually enabled him to quell the spirit that possessed *Ida*, was nothing more or less, by the author's own admission, than plain hypnotism. As to its pretense of the occult, then, "The Image in the Sand" was absolutely negligible; from the standpoint of the practical hypnotist I

fancy it was equally deficient. I would like, on that, to have had the opinion of Dr. William Lee Howard. Just as so many sex stories by women should have been analysed only by medical men, so "The Image in the Sand" should have been judged only by men of science. My province is only to assert that the book failed utterly to convince its reader; artistically it was a failure.

Note the last scene intended to be tremendous. The Egyptian spirit is about to be used to coerce *Ida*. But three able-bodied men have been expecting this, and by sheer brute force, eventually aided by a hypodermic syringe, turn *Ida* from her spirit master. Now, in any scale of logic, where is the reasonableness in a novel, purporting to be a convincing story of the occult, which proves that, after all, with muscle and morphia you may defy all the spirits that roam? You see the ridiculous conclusion of the whole matter!

In "Flames"—and that book was absurd enough!—there was far subtler suggestion of the occult; and in "The Garden of Allah" there was such writing as made the description of the sirocco in "The Image in the Sand" pale and ineffectual. Unfortunately for Mr. Benson, the two last-named novels appeared in the same year; his art, compared to that of Mr. Hichens, was sadly inadequate for his literary schemes. This was typical of the artistic futility that has ever since been Mr. Benson's distinctive quality. Immeasurably finer artist than the average woman novelist of his age, in artistic futility he was surpassed only by those same women.

In his story of souls that jumped, Mr. Hichens had, as we have seen, blazed the way for Mr. Benson. "The Image in the Sand" had been about a soul that jumped from Egypt to a quotidian incarnation. His next story, "The Angel of Pain," gave us the tragedy of a jumping goat. Mr. Benson, it is true, pretended that it was a story about the Return to Nature, the Simple Life, and

kindred fads that he thought would appeal to his fashionable feminine audience.

No; put not your faith in the simple life, in Pastor Wagner, Pastor Kneipp, or in Pan. That way lies a heavy, pungent smell, the smell of the goat, and upon your nonconformist breast the imprint of cloven hoofs, until, instead of being a pantheist, a barefoot, a simpleton, or whatever the brief term for your stripe may be, you are nothing but a somewhat distorted corpse. You go to bed one fine night, out in the open, as the doctrine you have fashioned for yourself dictates; you fade into dreams under the trees, among the birds and beasts whom you have managed to impress with a sense of your good-fellowship—and the first thing you know you are strangling, and screaming into the night this:

“Oh, my God! Oh, Christ!”

And you, having shouted, return to the gods of your ancestors, pass out of your pagan reaction, and out of every other sort of action. What your friends find, when they approach the hammock in which you have been sleeping the simple sleep, is merely a glimmering of a white-flanneled figure, with a something black, irregular, blotting out and concealing most of the thing in the hammock. The black blot skips suddenly into the air, disappears with dreadful frolicsome leaps and bounds; and you are found with Fear written all over your face, and with frightful contusions upon your breast, as if a great beast had danced and leaped there. It is true that before you actually draw the last breath, the fear on your face fades, and there appears, instead, joy—ineffable joy. Ineffable, I think, is always the word. But what can we do with even ineffable joy when we are entirely dead?

No; take my word for it, based upon Mr. Benson's, and avoid the life that is too close to nature. Be fashionable and take up the simple life as a fad, if you like, quite in the manner satirised politely if somewhat heavily by Mr. Benson; or be timidly suburban; be anything you

like in the fresh-air line, subscribing to the Fresh Air Fund, or the Ice Fund, or going in for any of those open-air processes that may be engaged in from your desk in town; but beware, ah, beware greatly of the actual return to nature!

We have heard a good deal about that return to nature. In some places they called it the return to the land; in others, the call of the wild. It meant about the same thing. Toyed with politely, airily—in the manner of Watteau and the Dresden shepherdesses, under the somewhat stagey trees—there was no harm at all. But the moment you pursued the scheme to its logical conclusion—look out for the pungent smell, the cloven hoofs, the simplification that is a little too sudden and spells death!

That, at least, is the logical conclusion according to Mr. Benson. Whether it is really logical or not, is another matter. I assure you that in the whole story logic was as much to seek as was real tragedy. All the conventional properties were used for stage settings in this cheap melodrama. A great artist may take the uncanny, the supernatural, the grotesque, and sublimiate it through his genius so that it makes upon us a vivid impression which quells our reason and our logic. But Mr. Benson in "The Angel of Pain" achieved nothing save the effect of great striving toward a confused aim. He wrote himself down, finally, as a second-rate novelist, juggling, and juggling awkwardly, with first-class materials. The whole matter of *Merivale* and his harking back to Pan, and to death, what a jumble it was of half-digested Christianity and paganism! The Christian dream of beauty conflicted and mingled with the pantheist's; the phrases of the written gospels elbowed those of the old nude Greeks; nowhere was there a hint that Mr. Benson dared originality of his own in this quest away from civilisation. Even to the goat legend, he used all the assorted shibboleths that he could find in hackneyed chronicles and creeds. This was the imagination of a

child translating human thought into the posturings of marionettes. To have followed the flight into nature to some magnificent end might have been a splendid task for a great artist; to close such flight with melodrama patterned on conventional legend was confession of mediocrity.

Only intellects of the most imitative type could have been impressed by "The Angel of Pain." I had almost written "primitive type"; but that would have been an injustice. The really, unsophisticatedly primitive would never have harked back to any legend, whether it was as picturesque as Pan, or as pungent as a goat. The entire episode of *Merivale's* return to Pan definitely stamped Benson as bourgeois. He was writing the conventional for the conventional, decking out the accepted legends with a not too skilfully woven tinsel of modernity. Never a glimmer of originality. Pan; the pan-pipes; the goat-smell; the patter about Christ on the cross; Nature used as a "back-drop" for it all;—what was it but one inmate of intellectual Suburbia bringing to his fellow-burghers some feeble imitations of legends already dimly familiar to them?

In but one brief page we thought to discover again the author of "Dodo." Where he described the dinner conversation at a house-party in the country there was a quick flash of the old fire; but even that died off into dull muttering; and we wonder, throughout the book, if this was indeed the writer who had once made such sacrifices for brilliancy.

The hackneyed was the keynote of the book. When the heroine first realised that she loved and was beloved, what was it that the reader was asked to find in her face? What but "the light which was never yet on sea or land, but only on the face of a woman"? When the artist in the story was painting his great portrait of the heroine, did he work as all craftsmen know the others work? No; he looked long and dreamily; he waited for



fine moments; he seized them in frenzy; he painted, in other words, upon the approved romantic pattern, as poseurs and the novel-reading public like to fashion it. This was what the suburban villa expected and what Mr. Benson always had in stock.

He was become the novelist in ordinary to the suburban villa.

I have always wondered what George Moore said to this novel if grim fate ever put it in his way. The chapters about painting, must, I think, have saddened his sad face still more. As for the *Merivale* return to nature—well, I assure you that with all the hocus-pocus about the birds that sang songs for him, and the goat that jumped on him, there was not one passage in all the hundreds of pages of that sort in this book to compare with the single passage in “Sister Teresa,” where Ulick painted this scene for *Evelyn*:

To keep her soul he said she must fly from the city, where men lose their souls in the rituals of materialism. He must go with her to the pure country, to the woods, and to the places where the invisible ones whom the Druids knew ceaselessly ascend and descend from earth to heaven, and heaven to earth, in flame-colored spirals. He told her he knew of a house by a lake shore, and there they might live in communion with nature, and in the fading lights, and in the quiet hollows of the woods she would learn more of God than she could in the convent.

Moore used the Druids, used legend—oh, we admit that!—but a masterful force of originality swept us on with him, in spite of that. In Benson nothing swept us, save distaste for his conventionality. “The Angel of Pain,” with its mess of ineffective “nature-faking” and rank melodrama, succeeded only in one thing, in securing for its author absolute right to the title of Bourgeois Benson.

Just as Edgar Saltus, in America, became the victim of his own brilliant phrases, losing in them his reasonableness, so E. F. Benson lost his brilliance in his bourgeoisie.

Yet Mr. Benson had not exhausted his menagerie. To say nothing of what wonders he may still have in store for the future, he added a vampire to his already extensive collection. Or, at any rate, he meant to. He did his best. The public that pays its money to Mr. Benson had come to expect fearful and wonderful creatures from him; he did his best to supply the demand. He gave them the stray and squinting spirit, haloed in stale light, and babbling strange tongues over the African sands; and he gave them the black, irregular, skipping goat that, masquerading as Pan, committed murder. So he thought to give his customers a human vampire.

Unfortunately his courage failed him a little in that enterprise. Though he meant his human vampire as the star of his performance in "Paul," yet the result deceived us; the creature in the ring was not, after all, the creature painted on the posters. We had to accuse Mr. Benson of having used a Barnum-like deception. Still, on the posters was so masterly a sketch of a human vampire that merely to have gazed on it was almost worth the price of the book. Indeed, if it had not been for a host of such fictitious figures as *Count Fosco*, and the gentleman described in Beatrice Harraden's "Fowler" (referred to earlier in my book), Mr. Benson's character of *Theodore Beckwith* might almost have been thought original. Even his name, if the Harraden hero had not been called *Theodore Bevan*, might have seemed original. But nowadays it is always hazardous to accuse Mr. Benson of originality.

A little picked bird of a man was this *Theodore*, fastidious as a D'Orsay, cruel as Nero. Of puny frame, he had the will to live so intense in him that the mere sight

of other people's vitality was as meat and drink to him. A horrible humor flamed constantly in him; a biting and malicious tongue did the bidding of a cruel and quick mind. Again, you see, the hackneyed formulas of Hugo, of Rigoletto, of Richard the Third, and Lord Byron! *Theodore's* "merry, goat-like laugh" was never so hearty as when he was watching the agony he had bred in others.

Had Mr. Benson kept his courage, this must have turned out a proper vampire. Vampire, and a touch of goat, too. . . . Ah, it might have been a sad day for Mr. Luther Burbank if Mr. Benson could have persevered to give us a cross between a vampire and a goat.

Our merry, goat-like *Theodore* had a great deal of money, which brought him all he wanted, including the lovely *Norah*. Having married her, he alternately tormented her, and lived upon her lusty vitality. When her hatred for him was firmly established, he took for secretary one *Paul*, a boy-and-girl friend of *Norah's*, and began to feast on that youth's exuberant vitality also. Observing *Paul* and *Norah* relapsing into quite innocent companionship, our vampire determines to feed his malice by driving them as dangerously together as possible; to enact, in brief, in his own household, the part of "El Gran Galeoto."

Observe, finally, for proof of Mr. Benson's inability to escape from the thrall of the pseudo-supernatural and the melodramatic, the star scene in "Paul."

*Paul* and *Norah* dancing together was the sight that of all sights in the world appealed most to the vampire in *Theodore*. As these two fine young creatures glowed in the exhilaration of the dance; as their beauty quickened with the awakening of that love for each other which unconsciously filled them; as their combined vitality waxed and burned with an almost visible flame—*Theodore* is pictured as watching and watching and drawing it all in in huge gulps of delight. He determined to take,

of that delight, one gulp greater than all the others. He decked out *Paul* and *Norah* as if for a costume ball; he had them surely waltz into consciousness of how much they loved each other while he, who had arranged the whole fantastic scene—the costumes, the seclusion—sat at a pianola and supplied the music. Picture it, will you! Two fancy-dress-ball partners waltzing; the little vampire at the pianola, sucking in their vitality, knowing he is leading them to the jaws of destruction, and hoping, indeed, that they will pass the gate!

One must do Mr. Benson this much justice: that was one of the finest arrangements in vampires and pianolas to be found anywhere!

After that descent into the unintentionally ridiculous, Mr. Benson, as usual, leaped into melodrama; the process was exactly that of the novels which preceded "*Paul*." He made *Paul* kill *Theodore* by way of a motor-car, and then tried to interest us in *Paul's* remorse. That was a lamentable anti-climax; it was consistent only in completing what has evidently become the routine of his conventionality as a novelist. The absurd; the melodramatic, and then the anti-climax; that is the stuff in which the once brilliant Mr. Benson now works; that is the stuff that choked the artist in him.

To surpass the pianola scene was impossible, even for Mr. Benson; he had to kill the vampire; there was nothing else to do. Though we had seen an Egyptian spirit squinting from the eyes of an English girl; though we had seen Pan resenting *Merivale's* impertinent approach and murdering him, goat-wise; we were not to see *Theodore* in the very act of fattening, vampirically, from *Paul's* vitality, while *Paul* visibly became a shadow of himself. No; splendid as was his skill on the pianola, *Theodore* remained a vampire *manqué*. The show did not, after all, come up to the posters.

The best one could say of "*Paul*" was that it was the sort of menagerial entertainment to which Mr. Ben-

son had educated his public. Nor did "The Climber" attest any progress in art.

Considered critically, Mr. Benson's career had reached its fixed formula of hopelessness long before this. The only thing left was wonder as to what absurdities he might still indulge in.

Artistically he had ceased to exist.



## CHAPTER THREE

THE curious case of "Dodo" Benson led to this conclusion, among others:

The average second-rate novelist in England is about as good a workman as our American first-raters.

Mr. Benson, from brilliant beginnings, and though struggling constantly toward larger things, declined into an artist of the second rate. Yet as craftsman, as manipulator of prose, he was always the equal of the leading American novelists of society. His devotion to society, his efforts to incorporate in his books the many changing fads and follies of society, combined with his intention to please, at all risks, a suburbanly minded public, were what ruined Mr. Benson. His ruin should have its lesson for our coming social historians on this side of the Atlantic; just as from his prose they may still learn something.

To name all the English second-raters who approached social history in fiction would be a weariness to our patience; and but slight help to my argument. Percy White, Richard Bagot and W. E. Norris were all good workmen in that vineyard; the latter, especially, was a far finer writer than the author of the American "best seller" mostly is—and a novelist, indeed, insufficiently appreciated—but I have no space to give them.

If this were not a book with a distinct and single aim, namely, to point out what seems to me the matter with American fiction, there are plenty of pleasant English reminiscences we might indulge in. There was delightful entertainment in Hewlett and Harland, those Anglo-

Saxons with the souls of Latins; in the sturdy shocks which Kipling gave us—and many other charming experiences came even to the sourest critic.

Kipling, particularly, we must not mention here: he would greatly spoil our argument. The example of this glorified and glorifying journalist, whose genius turned journalism into the most powerful literature of our time, would have exactly the wrong effect if cited for American following. What we must pray for is not facility in production, fluent ease in reporting life, mere surface glitter, or that most fatal of the gifts of the gods, cleverness; we have all those in plenty and to spare; what we need is deeper concern for the art of literature interpreted as finely as possible. Greater care for the manner of our writing is what we need. The matter will take care of itself.

Would our professors in favor of our trying always for a "bumper crop" of literature pretend for a moment that there was any likelihood of America's literary material going the way of its buffaloes and its forests? No; in a continent such as ours, there is no fear of that. What there is great danger of, however, is that for the bulk of what is written you will be able to see no literature. Already we recruit our so-called literature from the ranks of the most newly notorious, whether they have committed murder, compiled millions, or exchanged White House burdens for the heart of Africa.

But I stray too far along this by-path; it takes me to the main causes in my plea; and those causes are to be dealt with at greater length later in this book. What I wished, in beginning this present digression, to point out, was that even where this or that writer helped my argument, it was not always possible to include him. Sometimes the writer's work was neither sufficiently bad nor sufficiently good; sometimes, again, there was already plenty of critical stuff in existence about him. I have tried to choose only the extreme cases, to show how high

or how low our fiction ranged, and to pay critical attention to writers who have not received it elsewhere.

Throughout, too, you must remember, mine has been the principle of spontaneous selection. Because these are instanced, is no reason to suppose others slighted. The line must be drawn somewhere; unless, like the novelists of the Mudie's Library period in Victorian literature, I had three volumes to move in. My line has been drawn entirely at behest of personal fancy. For my not mentioning your favorite, Sir, or yours, Madame, there is no reason at all; and they may be just as great favorites with me as with you. If I have not scourged your particularly pet aversion, that is no proof that I do not hate it as heartily as you. In reassembling my critical memories, some crowded forward, that is all; I took the clearest of them, those that appealed most to me as sufficient for my argument.

Do not, then, blame me for saying nothing about Morley Roberts's delightful "The Idlers," or about "Broke of Covenden," or "Araminta," or about a score of other valuable pictures of social life as it is to-day. I am as alive to their qualities as you; but the scheme of my book is already, like the French omnibus, *Complet*; I have room for just so many literary passengers.

To take on those others who hail me from the corners of memory—well, that is matter for another book.

Before I come to the somewhat pompously meticulous efforts made by American historians of society, I would preface what I may say about them with the observation that if I hold them too lightly, it is because I have always in mind John Galsworthy's "The Country House" as a masterpiece in that sort. To expect such work on our side of the water, where neither life itself nor literature has yet reached such polish, is perhaps unfair. But there, none the less, is the high standard defined for us; when we can write like that, can exchange

for that fine human, philosophic outlook the awkward angularities of our prevalent dilettante attitudes—then indeed will we have triumphed over the ladies and the critics.

Aside from the detail of the greater finish in the life Galsworthy describes, the evolution of his art has shown such change and progress as any American artist might experience. His first books were by no means remarkable. It was not until he wrote "The Country House" that he found himself. There is no reason why an American, seeking only the development of his art, rather than the demands of the writing trade, should not rise similarly superior to convention.

Such a picture as John Galsworthy's "The Country House" is a piece of painting which must endure, because it vitalises a type, an entire way of living, a *milieu*, that is as much a part of the history of the English people as anything in the reports of Parliament.

If one has given way at all to the notion that the English were in but scant possession of either humor or finesse, it becomes time, in face of such a book as this, to readjust one's view. If we were wont to murmur, while whimsically or furtively dandling something in yellow covers, that "they do these things so much better in France," we no longer, as far as English fiction is concerned, have excuse for that murmur. Certain domains are no longer exclusively French preserves. The example of France in artistic finesse, in care for the mere art of literature, is still high enough to fill America with shame; but English art has encroached on one French preserve after another.

Nothing in French art is finer than the Galsworthy satire on that bulwark of England's national life, the country gentleman. So fine is that art, that I find myself in exactly the case of those American newspapers who spill all their eulogistic adjectives daily. I find myself able to declare, simply, but definitely, that this is the

finest picture of the life in an English county family that our literature holds. No Trollope, no Jane Austen, no Thackeray even, has done the thing better than that. It is nothing less than a national document. Mr. Galsworthy has still much of his career before him; if I do not analyse his one fine book now, it is because he may go yet farther in his art; besides, that art defies critical analysis. It is easy enough to say that whether in "The Country House" or "Fraternity" he works almost without a plot, that he is always painting character, character, and nothing but character; that he sketches types so faithfully that we know them as redolent of England's actual breath and being;—all this does not hint the charm his art exerts. There is much more than character drawing, than satire; there is, for one thing, the large irony that is in all great human affairs. Here is an England, painted by an Englishman, that has all the sharp outline a foreigner might have given the picture, and yet, behind the keen edge of satire is the hand of one who loves his country and would not see it topple from the dangerous height that men call Complacency.

Before I admit, once and for all, my inability sufficiently to appraise "The Country House" or "A Commentary," I would point out another such picture, but little below those in art, that marks equally the distance between the first-raters in England and those in America, and, so doing, emphasises the debt we owe those who have made our literature what it is. This was Richard Pryce's "The Successor."

Abrim with humor, and sparkling with gems of characterisation, this book used the art of suggestion more delicately than any other English novel in the last 25 years. Joined with keen insight into the life and conduct of a great English country estate, was a shrewd undercurrent of plot that was little less than Balzacian. One did not know which to admire the more; the skill



with which the entire household of *Alton* was depicted; the wonderful portrait, as by Daumier or Leandre, of the mistress in that great house; or the subtlety with which, at the back of all, was outlived the mysterious incident which enabled that mistress to achieve for her great house an heir.

Simple enough, in essentials, was the story, and impossible to be hinted, since, as in all the finest stories, it is only the telling that matters. Simple as it was, thin as the theme seemed, the reader was constantly kept alert by Mr. Pryce's subtle fancy, his shrewd humor, and his keen insight into intelligences both fine and dull. If the book had held nothing but the portrait of *Lady Alton* it would still have been worth a dozen or so of our American "best sellers." The pains she took to be aristocratic; the phrases with which she occasionally betrayed her unaristocratic origin; the way she bore herself toward the old family servant, *Balderton*, now conciliating her, now fearful of her;—all this combination of make-believe lady with the morals of a brood-mare was painted so sharply as to make a memorable picture in the gallery over which *Emma Bovary* presides.

If, when her exalted position still sat newly on her, the mistress of this great house had still some betraying turns of speech, as "like I do," or "Anner" instead of "Anna," or if she "laid" on the sofa, time taught her to drop those easy peccadilloes; yet there were certain other tricks of speech she never lost. She always said of fruit, for instance, that it was "beautiful and ripe," only a shade less dreadful than her housemaids who said "beautifully and ripe"; she declared of a dog that it fared "sumptuously"; and she gave herself away, to put it vulgarly, every day, in such little lapses as in England mark the line between those to the manor born and those who have entered the manor by way of the stock exchange or the brewery. Here, on our side of the water, where the language is equally abused by those who ought

to know better and those who never will, such distinctions in English speech would by no means determine social position.

To that whole question, however, of the speech spoken in America, and the English used as dialogue in some of our novels, I mean to devote a later chapter. My examination into that detail will disclose one of the strongest proofs of my contention, that our literature and our culture are rank with weeds.

While the dialogue in "The Successor" was a model which our domestic vendors of talk might profitably study, it was the characterisation, and the running philosophic comment of our novelist, that made the book one to commend as an example of what can be done in picturing society in the twentieth century. The best of English and French methods in fiction were combined in this story.

I wish American methods were up to such an achievement.

Unfortunately, the only American up to that was an expatriate—Henry James.

## CHAPTER FOUR

BEFORE we consider Henry James, however, we must, in order to show how far behind the imported lags the domestic article, give some slight review to the work of Robert W. Chambers, Winston Churchill and David Graham Phillips.

Mr. Chambers always seemed the most finished artist of the three. He knows the craft of writing; in virtuosity he is one whose books show many admirable tricks; he has, unfortunately, some of the lightness that comes with facility. Mr. Hamlin Garland's use of the word sincerity has made me avoid it whenever possible; yet in the case of Mr. Chambers one is not infrequently reminded of the soulful sigh with which Mr. Garland is once said to have greeted Richard Harding Davis: "Ah,—why don't you dig deeper?" Mr. Chambers might be the better for greater depth in his work.

His earlier work had no bearing on the present subject; it was sheerly romantic, invariably well done, but afforded the social historian no clue. In such a social picture as "The Younger Set" he proved his intention to enter the field against Hichens and the other Englishmen. Yet neither that book nor others he produced in that category deserve mention, as fashionable chronicles, in the same breath with "The Londoners," or even the Morley Roberts stories, "The Idlers" and "Lady Penelope," though that was evidently the vein they attempted.

Partly, perhaps, the failure came from the still inchoate condition of that society which Mr. Chambers tried to depict. Mr. James has assured us that a society must be old before it becomes critical; perhaps we might, in mercy to Mr. Chambers, twist that into the assertion that until a society is old it is impossible to criticise it.

For my part, I think Mr. Chambers' method tended toward the failure, as works of art, of such stories as "The Younger Set" and "The Firing Line." He seemed determined to get New York society into his fiction by insisting on the little things. If the proper fashionable air could be photographed rather than painted; if a picture of a period, and of a manner of living and thinking, could be given in strokes so careful that each one seemed to say: "This is the way they spend their hours; they have just learned how, and I have also just learned how, and I am going to put it all down, before I forget, and before we all try to learn some other social game!" then these stories did it. Personally, I do not think the thing can be done like that. When you painstakingly photograph a detail, you may still give but a blurred impression of the whole.

Still, having made up his mind to that method, Mr. Chambers certainly worked earnestly and laboriously. He noted even more than seemed humanly possible of the American effort to make fashionable the mingled town-house and country-house life of the English. Yet what he actually achieved was as paltry as the whole social *milieu* that engaged him. You had only, by contrast, to read Galsworthy to see wherein both Mr. Chambers's matter and manner were insignificant.

The changing tides and currents in New York fashionable life as we see it to-day are what engage Mr. Chambers when he is most serious. Often enough, he is only flippant, for purposes of profitable pot-boiling; it is so easy for him to write well, that he writes far too much; he is one of the most conspicuous victims of those commercial conditions in American literature which so deserve rebuke. When he is in earnest, his pictures, too labored though they are, are valuable. In those books the novelist painted the existing social sets as foul with corruption; he described the physical and mental degeneration of the now dominant generation; and he re-

ported picturesquely the divorce storm that so repeatedly tears through the most conspicuous avenues of fashion. It was in the younger set that he found hope for the future; he held that salvation for our society lies in those who are growing up as its younger members.

He differed, in that conclusion, from other authorities. David Graham Phillips, for instance, began his novel, "The Second Generation," on exactly the opposite theory, namely, that our youngers, expensively educated by the money earned in a generation of toil, are prone to degenerate into sluggards and snobs. Mr. Phillips, it is true, meant America; Mr. Chambers meant New York. It was an interesting contrast in points of view, even as the mere art of the two writers also affords illumination to the analyst. It would be possible, perhaps, to find both these theories about American society right; it is often the second generation which, issuing from the great body of the country, degenerates, in New York, into that breed which sociologists find rotten and the salvation of which lies in its children.

It is rather in what he may yet do, than in what he has done, that Robert Chambers is to be reckoned with as a novelist of society. If he can forget the commercial lures of publishers and public; if he can consider our society critically without being too much fascinated by the personal attractions it offers, he may some day write the book that will accord with his abilities in the mere technics of his art.

Aside from the difference of opinion already noted, no greater contrast can be imagined than exists between the work of Mr. Chambers and Mr. David Graham Phillips. The former does not know how to write badly; the latter learns but slowly how not to write ill. The former takes few things seriously; the latter is nothing if not in earnest.



Through story after story Mr. Phillips was nothing save a lecturer who used the verbiage of journalism. His documents and his parables appeared in books, instead of in newspapers; otherwise there was little difference. Now it was corruption in our politics, now in our insurance, that engaged him; but never were we so conscious of reading a novel as of being dragged through unpleasant facts, and amid unpleasant persons, by a lecturer who, though doubtless instructive, had no great charm of manner.

At a time when a host of other writers were reminding us of our political rottenness, Mr. Phillips joined the chorus with a story called "The Plum Tree." Corruption in cities and States had been marshaled for us by Lincoln Steffens, Josiah Flynt, Winston Churchill, and even A. H. Lewis. Though posed as a novel, "The Plum Tree" was nothing but a plain document upon political conduct in America. Plain, not to say commonplace. The subject, in this book as in many similar ones by the same author, subdued to its own level the literary manner of its would-be chronicler in fiction.

Just as in the political story we had never been told anything new, so in his story about insurance nothing that he instanced of unscrupulousness and dishonesty was great news to us. He marshaled, in "Light-Fingered Gentry," many notorious facts, many obvious indecencies toward the insuring public; he made fairly vivid the complete lawlessness with which the robber barons in that special field of finance manipulated to themselves the greatest possible spoils, to the public the lightest possible pound of flesh; yet there was nothing in the book that readers of newspapers did not know before, or that differed in any essential from the journalese jargon in which our newspapers are mostly written. The author's style, in that book, was as loose, as light-fingered, as the morals of any of his most blackly painted rogues. It

was an example to weary us anew, for the hundredth time, of the so-called novel with a purpose. The purpose so seldom permits of art!

Save in the detail of reaching a different audience, these novels are exactly on the newspaper level. One could not imagine even the most careless reader, debauched by the cheap journalistic colloquialisms and corrupt phraseologies, finding in them any page or sentence that he could not have found as well written in his favorite newspaper. Both books were rank with useless and tautologic verbiage.

You have seen what were the early faults of this writer. Nothing in all of his previous writing-with-a-purpose had prepared us for the virtues in his "Old Wives for New." There, for the first time, we were able to forget the man's manner, and find praise for the courage that had enabled him to triumph over it. There, finally, he wrote the book that ranked him among the social historians to whom American literature must look.

Taking this case as example, the American novelist must needs have written at least ten novels, more or less successful, before he finds it safe to describe men and women as they are. Until, in other words, by an incontrovertible ledger of achievement—reducible to terms of the number of copies sold, of profits amassed—the novelist has the whiphand over both publishers and public, he lacks, in America, courage to issue from the ranks of those who merely supply demands. The demand varies. Now it is the pretty-pretty; now it is the sexual; again it is the laying bare of public abuses.

In "Old Wives for New" Mr. Phillips found a fortunate mean between the two extremes that had marked our fiction. Either we had life described as a perfumed fairy tale, or else as a sink of salacity. If our novels had been spineless, merely somewhat intricate decorations on the subject of life, rather than pictures of life itself,

this book was proof of courage and path-breaking, while yet it avoided those perils of suggestiveness which had been so eagerly sought by so many ladies.

The story, as story, was old enough. A wife is depicted as part glutton, part mollusc and part *malade imaginaire*, lapsing from her youth's first fresh charm into sloth, fat, and querulousness. The husband retains his youth, its vigors and vanities. An old story, you see; but here vividly presented in terms of the immediate and familiar. Eventually the husband is definitely alienated; finds love elsewhere; and the story closes with both the original partners divorced, and otherwise mated. A very old story indeed. We might easily say that in Moliere, in Balzac, or even in Bourget, we found such plots more perfectly elaborated; or that our newspaper gave us just such a story any day of any week. True; but everything, in a novel, depends on the sum total of impression given. That total was distinctly valuable in this case.

The sex-problem, and the characters posed for us, were vital and actual. Everything, for the first time in this novelist's career, made for really immediate and vivid social history. Something of the mid-continental heart of the country was in the story; something, also, of that New York which glitters its surface charm upon the negative of cosmopolitan appreciation. Since the early novels of the two Edgars, Fawcett and Saltus, there had not been better pages about the fleeting phases of New York. Many more or less notorious places of public resort were used as scenes for those parts of the story wherein New York exerts, upon the male characters in it, a fascination comparable to that of Paris in Charpentier's "Louise." Even a well-remembered actual episode—of the millionaire *viveur* who was shot while in his inamorata's flat and taken hence, though stark in death, in a carriage to his own house, where his death from actual causes was eventually announced—was used by Mr.

Phillips effectively. He was still the special correspondent, still the reporter; but he gave distinct signs of becoming a novelist. Before this he had never been other than the newspaper man or the preacher.

What was most encouraging in "Old Wives for New" was the dominant note of broad intelligence on which the author treated such eternal questions as home, love, and divorce. He permitted "no nonsense" about religion, about duty, or all the old shibboleths for conventional minds, to deflect his rigid reasoning. His hero's wife, by her untidiness, her uncleanness, had set an impassable gulf between herself and him; he turned from that, on to a path of his own. He still, if he could not change or help her life, had his own to live. He fulfilled the selfish demands of the Ego; his was the doctrine of millions of unconscious Nietzscheans.

It was by his sketch of the slatternly wife that Mr. Phillips most completely proved his emancipation from the ranks of the Great Unsexed. The influence of woman on our literature was for either too much of shame or too little. Our novelists had either to attempt such reckless suggestiveness as only women are expert in, or else to conform to all the petty foot rules of provincialism and conventional morality that the other sort of American woman applies. It took courage to so pay his respects to "the sex" as he did in that slattern's sketch; it showed that, for once, an American novelist had chosen to forget that only women read American books, and that if you offend American women you are in danger of your literary life. He showed his married heroine's decline into unsightly fat; her abstention from water; he told of her hair's unpleasant odor; of her stuffing herself with rich food, and then complaining of illness; he showed her pleading housewifely duties in all emergencies, and yet never doing a mortal thing other than stuffing her stomach or taking naps. We had to chuckle in delight over the lecture her doctor gave her. Inasmuch as it so

clearly outlines the text on which much in the book was devised, let me quote a little from that lecture:

These stupid, unthinking writers, pandering to the stupid, unthinking public! Plays and novels and poems about the petty, unreal, essentially ridiculous violations of man's silly little conventionalities of law and morals, when the real "strong situations," the real tragedies, all center about the immutable laws of the universe. He that sins against conventional morals can laugh, if he is strong enough to shrug at public opinion. But health—that determines life and happiness and love and friends and food, clothing, shelter—the soul that sinneth against health, it must die! . . . Poor woman! Driveling about duty, when she'd better have been worrying about weight! If the girth had stayed right, there'd have been no need to appeal to the policeman duty. Poor woman! Ignorance! Ignorance and vanity—and superstition!

Whether this slattern was typical or exceptional, no American had before this attempted her. She was drawn as of the Middle West; if she is a possibility there in well-to-do circumstances, what may not be said of the Southerners who to actual aversion to water joined lack in luxurious surroundings? By this, and other details in his book, Mr. Phillips may have started the reproach that his book was written to defend male transgressions of the marriage convention; but in any other than petty philosophy he went far toward proving that the laws of hygiene are as vital as the laws of absolute morality.

Only one other American book saw life larger than mere creeds and conventions would make it, and to that we have already referred, namely, "The Road to Damascus." That was finer art than Mr. Phillips's; but if his book did nothing else than remind the critic of "The Road to Damascus" it deserves applause. In both these books there was plenty of stuff to stir up the little-morality-animals in many a house that calls itself puritan. If



in the old physician's doctrines in the Phillips book there was plenty of Nietzsche, there was yet more in the story about *Richarda*, and about co-education. If the slattern in "Old Wives for New" left one full of disgust and pity, that wonderful, loveliest and most intelligent of heroines, *Richarda*, in the other book, restored the balance.

We have so much amateurish rubbish shot at us—so much stuff written to prove, apparently, that you can write without thinking—that it was vast relief to find writers who knew life in the large, who, accepting our modern conventions, yet posed problems going far beyond convention, into the wide space of humanity. The taste in "The Road to Damascus" was truer; the dialogue more telling; the philosophy saner and sweeter; above all, the art of the narrative and the characterisation was finer; yet it is possible to think of the two books, by Mr. Phillips and by H. A. Mitchell Keays, together. I can pay Mr. Phillips no greater compliment than that. You will have seen, in an earlier chapter, where I rank "The Road to Damascus." It was at least one book by an American woman that mitigated a little the crimes against literary art committed by the sex in general.

Even so, "Old Wives for New" went far to atone for much slipshod and merely reportorial or sermonising writing that Mr. Phillips had done; it marked him as a writer who might possibly become valuable. His "Joshua Craig," written since then, was disappointing; yet one disappointment should not make us lose hope.

Although Mr. Winston Churchill has never yet issued from the ranks of the reformers, such large and genuine earnestness has always informed his novels, that it is impossible not to take him seriously. His taking of pains, on the Carlylean formula, has amounted to something like genius. Though the critic might approach his work from the standpoint of mere art, it was impossible not to

be impressed by the depth and seriousness of his concern for the political and moral humanities of his country.

From one large, sober canvas, Mr. Churchill passed to another; he took his time; he deserved the careful appreciation of the critic in that he never rushed into the market with pot-boilers because pot-boilers were in demand. His pen ranged in description of first this part of our country, then another; period after period in our history engaged him. To enumerate the many fine scenes and characters he offered, in recent years, to those readers who loved the "historical novel," would be useless now.

Finally, Mr. Churchill deserved attention by being one of our few novelists to do things as well as he described them. It is not so long ago since he was running for Governor of his State, and it becomes yearly more and more evident that his desire to better the public life about him has its roots in something else than possible profit from royalties. In actual statecraft he may yet rank with his English namesake. If success in politics, however, meant, in his case, cessation of his career as novelist, we might heartily wish him to be continuously unsuccessful in serving his commonwealth. There is always, to be sure, the example of Disraeli, to prove that the same man can be brilliant both in fiction and politics.

One need go no farther than "Mr. Crewe's Career" to judge Mr. Churchill in even the hastiest way; he had done nothing better. It is true that in the earlier story of that same series, "Coniston," he prepared us for realisation of how deeply he had studied the gulf between our theory of popular government and the actual practice of it. But "Coniston" was carefully dated into the past; "Mr. Crewe's Career" was of the immediate moment.

That Mr. Churchill had learned much from his own political campaigns was made clear. The story showed keenly what is the matter with some of our New England

States. In picture after picture of the political organisation dominating that hill-country, the novelist revealed, with fine literary art, what all whose eyes were not blinded by phrases or by money-greed had long realised, namely, that it is government by corporation which actually exists, however much we may pretend that the ballot and majority rule have anything to do with it. There was nothing more sickening for an American, to whom patriotism means something more than being boisterous on the Fourth of July, than admission of the lamentable truth in much Mr. Churchill recorded. We knew well enough the State of which he wrote; it was the same State of which he had wished to be governor. "Sour grapes" is the last phrase you should fling at this writer; he impresses you as far too honest to be swerved, as novelist, by anything that might happen to him personally. Yet his personal campaigns added notably to his store of knowledge about the people and their government. We knew well enough, too, that great railroad monopoly which he showed as the supreme arbiter of men's fortunes in that region.

That corporation had arrogated to itself all the wheels of the political machinery, until, at the period of this novel, we saw it ruthlessly dominant. It had its political army, well trained, and well paid. Time and again, in many a scene vivid with character and humor, we saw the hotel where all the manœuvres were arranged; we saw the room where the henchmen sat, where the entire government of the great state was cut and dried; and we saw the huge farce of conventions pretending to be free expressions of the People, while actually but screens for the autocracy of great corporations. Page on page was rich in caricature of shrewd lobbyists, of country politicians, and of unscrupulous financiers.

The reader's ire was effectively aroused at the spectacle of a railroad president sitting in a New York office and running a New England State as completely

as he ran his own traffic department. It was true that such reader, if sophisticated, need not—mindful of an even grimmer sight, that of a Rhode Island Senator who once ran the whole United States—have been vastly surprised at any of Mr. Churchill's sketches of the game of politics as played in a mountain land; but he had to admit the vivid manner of the presentment, and feel sympathy for such persons in the story as were fighting the good fight, for reform, for decent government, and for destruction of the old government by corporation and by lobby. We knew well enough, as I have said, that great corporation which was shown in this book as spending all its money in running a State, holding that to be cheaper than observing the laws of life and safety; for years that corporation had committed murder at grade crossings, and had never improved either its manners or its roadbed save at the point of the public's pistol.

(I have always wondered if Mr. Charles Mellen's opinion of "Mr. Crewe's Career" was by any chance fit for publication. An enterprising reporter, I should think, might have enjoyed a brilliant quarter of an hour by engaging the Shore Line Emperor in conversation on that subject when the novel was still new. He might have asked, among other things, if the New London grade-crossing, where Dr. Appleton's wife was killed some years ago, is still the same old death-trap; and could have followed that up, in the fine inconsequential manner of the professional interviewer, by asking if Mr. Mellen believed, with Mr. Churchill, that running a legislature was cheaper than running a railroad on civilised lines.)

If Mr. Churchill went further, in this book, in his closeness to nature, to the actual soil and life of our people than ever before, his art also showed a ripening in its humor. It was necessary to consider this novel in any reckoning made of American social chroniclers, since at base of all narrower society elements is the principle of human society in the large; and political reform,

philosophically construed, means little other than social reform. The story marked a ripening in power and humor.

Indeed, had there not been the larger achievement, already pointed out, the picture of *Humphrey Crewe* himself entitled the author to general thanks. Here, as he lived and breathed, was a Human Pest. A pest in society, in his neighborhood, and finally in politics. He typified the nervously active bore rather than the dull and passive bore of the Thackeray period. He was an essentially American pest. His name had been variously spelled in the highways and byways of popular journalism, where his presence had long been known; sometimes he was called Know-it-all, sometimes Butt-in; essentially always the same type was meant. Mr. Churchill first gave him literary being in the portrait of *Humphrey Crewe*. Whether we live in a Plaza, or on Piccadilly, in a Brooklyn boarding-house or Bloomsbury lodgings, we know the Human Pest; his name is legion; he is of all ages, all complexions; like the poor we have him always with us. The moneyed, sophisticated version of him has seldom been more sharply sketched than in "Mr. Crewe's Career."

In this trio of Robert Chambers, David Graham Phillips and Winston Churchill we had, then, men who were trying, from differing premises and points of view, to hint the fundamental facts of American social life. The one considered the great Middle West, in its contrast against New York; another dealt with New England; another with New York and its suburban regions, geographical and intellectual. I have chosen them as typical of the best that was being done. It was none too good; it was not better than England's second best; but it was doubtless the best our conditions permitted.

And that, precisely, is my point. Those three were Americans, writing of America, for that audience com-



posed of women and newspapers which in America forms the general taste. Of distinctive literary art, aside from subject, there was not more, in all these three, than should furnish one really adequate artist in *belles lettres*. One was a sincere reporter; another a brilliant trifler; the third a painstaking reformer. The great portrayer of society was not there.

He was not, indeed, anywhere in America. The only way America could claim such a one was by haling home the American who had removed himself, as much as possible, from the conditions of our literary cosmos: Henry James.

## CHAPTER FIVE

UPON Mr. James there can be but one verdict; in the lines he has chosen, he is master. He is our only representative in the domain usually called *belles lettres*, but which might as well be Englished as the fine art of literature.

Georg Brandes, visiting London in 1896, admitted Mr. James as America's only specimen in that sort; you may find it in his volume on "Gegenden & Menschen."

If you consider what Mr. James has done, in the novel, the essay, and in every sort of criticism; and consider, also, the art of his doing it; you will find few Americans to come near him.

For the first time, in this review of mine, I am able to voice my appreciation of a novelist, who was many other things besides. He has illumined for us, better than any other writer, all those provinces of international social comparison in which Americans have had place.

He has stood, in the manner even more than the matter, alone.

It was a splendid isolation Mr. James kept. His devotion to manner and manners was a singular relief from that type of letters represented by the materially notorious personage of a moment who, for no better reason than that an editor or publisher has offered a bribe, breaks into prose as blithely as a bull into a china-shop. The bull's business in life, we know, is by no means a matter of walking on eggs; the notorious personage's business has more often been dollars or divorce, rather than finesses of grammar and syntax. These persons, having been asked, never doubt they can "write." In the sense that nine out of ten so-called business men do

dictate to their secretaries letters that go through the mails (even though no English merchant of twenty-five years ago would have let such linguistic abortions leave his office), one may admit that they can "write." But one thing they can never do, whether they have won to eminence—and the grace of publishers—by way of the stage, or of scandal, or of accumulated millions, they can never "write" as Henry James writes.

For which, you may say, they should thank their stars. Perhaps; it remains, as always, a question of taste. The finer taste, I assert, is with Mr. James. The master of prose rarely conceives himself fitted to pose, casually, as a master of steel, or oil, or politics. Yet any and all of those have time and again thought that English prose was a trick they could learn while they watched the tape-ticker.

Long ago we heard the opinion that Tantalus, doomed to revisit earth and its tortures, would infinitely prefer the eagle pecking at his vitals to the everlasting withdrawal of hopes so illusively painted as in the majority of Mr. James's stories. The substance of those criticisms was that nothing climactical was ever allowed to happen; that everything was an analysis of motives for doing things which were never described; and finally, that the door to the real location of the word "Finis" was invariably, though suavely, shut in the reader's face. Those objections never succeeded in moving Mr. James from his allegiance to the ideals of his art. His manner of presupposing an instinctive eye to the artistic, and the quietistic, in his readers, has never faltered; he has never, in that respect, ceased most delicately presuming that in America there existed a modicum of intelligent people.

It is true, that until you came to examine the woof of his product very closely, you could fancy in his stories all the essentials save the most important; compression, ingenuity, form, style,—but hardly any action at all.

This was especially so in his earlier and shorter stories, of which there are a goodly number of volumes. Reading even those stories, however, you had to admit that in the sketching of character, in the understanding of the subtleties of the modern temper as found in the higher airs of civilisation, Mr. James had no equal, and that in the artistic analysis of mental episodes, he excelled all his contemporaries. Even those who railed at his denationalisation, and refused to read a man who "satirises his own country," had to allow that there was no other American possessed of so much sheer art.

He was always, in every fine and large sense of the words, a Man of Letters.

Most deserved was that criticism on his earlier fiction which accused him of over-emphasising the "shop" of the arts. After the days of "Daisy Miller" came a period when all his exquisite skill was employed exclusively upon the difficult problems of the finer life. He exhausted the elusive decorativeness of drawing-room life. His vision for the delicate, elaborate complexity of social intercourse became keener year by year. His were problems such as never occur to the men and women engaged in the life-draining pursuit of mere living; they beset the minds only of those whom fortune has favored to the point where the small finesses of existence become affairs as important as, in other walks of life, are the struggles to make both ends meet. It was the difference between the skilled dancers who dispute over a curve, and the children who are learning to walk.

That he did write too much "shop" at one time, there can be no denying. I recall that in the volume called "The Real Thing," for instance, one story was about an artist and his model; one was about a dramatist; and the remaining two were about literature. From the point of view of those who like muscle in their literature, the

old objections were here more valid than ever; no one seemed to do anything in particular. Yet the quality of the author's art was maintained with almost annoying persistence. His refinements reached the point of an almost imperceptible fineness. His phrase became daily richer. Yet one could imagine all these virtues of mere manner, becoming, to some readers, nothing less than irritating.

The art with which he described the absence of all action was greater than what other writers expended on literature of the between-the-eyes sort. His personages lived amid the perpetual flash of prophetically clear-sighted small-talk; they understood what was meant so long before it was said, that it had really been active philanthropy in Mr. James to have vaccinated actual society with some such cleverness. With delicate whimsy he spun his psychologic theorems, rarely stepping beyond the narrow bounds of his own and the sister-arts.

Even when Mr. James issued from that "shop" period, and began a series of large and memorable canvases in the approved form of the novel, the cavillers did not cease. They objected, about one novel after another—I intend here no catalogue of them—that people of flesh and blood would soon enough, and definitely enough, have worked out such hazy problems as he set; they would have done things, instead of quibbling everlastingly about what might be done. Those objections were ill taken. Mr. James posed his people far too accurately; if we accepted them at all as possible personages, we had to accept, also, that what he showed them thinking, saying and doing was, for them, the inevitable. Nor could one justly continue the accusation that George Moore voiced inimitably once and for all time, years ago, that "right bang in front of the reader nothing happens. . . . There is not so much as a hat thrown out of the window." In such a passage as this, from "The Golden Bowl,"



however, it seems to me that something did happen; it is the one wherein the prince and his former flame rekindle their old amorous fires:

“Of a sudden . . . everything broke up, broke down, gave way, melted and mingled. Their lips sought their lips, their pressure their response and their response their pressure; with a violence that had sighed itself the next moment to the longest and deepest of stillnesses, they passionately sealed their pledge.”

No printed depreciations ever swerved Mr. James from his art as he had conceived it. He continued placidly tracing his intricate intellectual embroideries. That those embroideries became, with the years, more and more intricate; that the confusion in him of so many hesitancies, tolerances, recessions, catholicities and questionings—the backings and fillings, in short, of the critical spirit—tended more and more to obscure definition and verdict; that had indeed to be admitted. He became the logical issue of the analytical temper: the critic reduced to an almost absurd negation of dogma. Because he saw all sides so bravely, knew all the pros and cons, tried equally the catholic temper and the provincial, it became hard for him, as novelist, as essayist, or as critic, to say: It is. He was reluctant, even, to say: It seems. That tendency in him, that touch of the difficult and the opaque with which he involved his style, was what gave the cheap journalists their cues. However much, though, they may, with their easy derision, have amused the people who had neither the wit nor the courage to take their culture at first hand, they never affected the author himself. He went about his artistry in words, serene in being, for conscientiousness at least, a master.

In support of his mastery in passages of supreme beauty, descriptive, not only of intellectual subtleties, but of actual physical tangibilities, I must quote this picture of an English country house in an English spring-time:

What with the noble fairness of the place, the generous mood of the sunny, gusty, lusty English April, all panting and heaving with impatience, or kicking and crying, even, at moments, like some infant Hercules who wouldn't be dressed; what with these things and the bravery of youth and beauty, the insolence of fortune and appetite so diffused . . . the stir of the air was such . . . every voice in the great bright house was a call to the ingenuities and impunities of pleasure; every echo was a defiance of difficulty, doubt or danger; every aspect of the picture a glowing plea for the immediate . . .

It would be difficult, surely, to paint with a brush more dipped in the sensuous, far as one mostly was from connecting Mr. James with that temper. That passage, also, was from "The Golden Bowl," a story in which the author's virtues were, it seems to me, most conspicuous. Plenty of things, fine, moving and splendid—in the recital, at any rate—happened in front of the reader in that story. The things that happened in suggestion should have been tremendous enough for the most avid gourmet of sensations. Observe, again, the completion of that passage first quoted:

"It put them, it kept them together, through the vain show of their separation, made the two other faces, made the whole lapse of the evening, the people, the lights, the flowers, the pretended talk, the exquisite music, a mystic golden bridge between them, strongly swaying and sometimes almost vertiginous."

Quotation, however, is never fair to Mr. James. The dram-drinking reader, who wishes to taste here, sip there, skip everywhere, could do nothing with such work. He must drink it all, leisurely and with tender appreciation of each finesse, or not at all. Time and again, as in "What Maisie Knew" or "The Ambassadors" or many other novels, he took the simplest case, and brought out of it such subtleties, such delicacies of shading, of situation, and of characterisation, as made us see that not

one of the many pages could have been omitted, not a phrase spared, lest the entire web show a flaw. No page could be taken separately as meaning anything whatsoever; yet as part of the wonderful total it was exquisite mosaic.

That was one of the quarrels people had with him; part of the ammunition of the easy parodist,—that the isolated page, the abstracted phrase, could so often be turned into sheer nonsense. If there was one writer easier than another to lampoon, to parody, it was Henry James. Note the following:

The young man, in his actual mood, smiled. "Oh, I've precisely made that out."

"Yes," she said, "if you hadn't by this time made out . . ." The waters of talk spread a little, and Maggie presently contributed an idea in saying: "What has really happened is that the proportions, for us, are altered."

He accepted, equally, for the time, this somewhat cryptic remark. He quite took it in. He declined, however, to be drawn into a statement of his idea. Statements were too much like theories, in which one lost one's way.

She immediately passed, at any rate, to another point. "It isn't anything that, after all, properly concerns even you."

On this, for a little, they sat face to face.

Now, always excepting Ollendorff and the classic manipulators of the Greek particle, there was, of course, but one writer from whom such sentences could be extracted. To a mind sufficiently unscrupulous as well as nimble it was always ridiculously easy to caricature page upon page of such talk from whatever happened to be Henry James's newest novel. In his "waters of talk" there were innumerable pools of phrase and verbiage that, torn from their surroundings, reflected absolutely nothing. For the purpose of parody, there was nothing more tempting. Yet the paragraph above is not parody; those

are literal extracts from "The Golden Bowl." The possibilities for ridicule in such passages are as cheap as they are patent.

I do not deny that I, too, have laughed. We all have our cheap moments. All the old and easy laughs against Mr. James I have laughed; I have parodied him as easily and as well as the others have done it. I have sung the song of his obsession by the Greek particle. Not another writer living, I often enough reminded my readers, so larded his prose with the "even," the "indeed," the "at any rate," the "at least," and the "quite" which our memories recalled to us, chiefly, as belonging to the days when we were construing from Thucydides. Observation, at the most superficial, did not show us those particles in actual conversational use to-day; yet, at deepest, we were forced to concede Mr. James as true an artist here as in all else. For, laugh as we might, at what a random page of his might disclose for ridicule, the summed-up pages, the book, remained always a work of art from the hand of a master.

Occasional uglinesses of phrase, and needless inventions, could easily be found. I find in one place "inattackably straight," and in another "the rightest manner on the wrongest assumption." But against these, which you may duplicate in any one of his books, how many fortunate turns there were! The number of happy phrases should have atoned for any labor spent in unraveling the more difficult windings of his prose. "In the Cage," for instance, showed several felicities that I recall. "A mere male glance" held pages of observation in it; there was a grocer who had been dimly struck by "the concatenation between the tender passion and cheap champagne"; in one luminous flash we were shown a couple resting on a park bench while "there were other couples on other benches, whom it was impossible not to see, yet at whom it was impossible to look"; and the usual load

of steam boat excursionists was rounded up in the line "close packed items in terrific totals of enjoyment." In "The Golden Bowl" we could find "the moral and the murmur of his walk," and "the cigars of his youth, rank with associations."

Nor would it be fair to pretend that his beauties of style were his artistic all. His characterisations were always instinct with truth. It was the work of a master who chose to spin subtleties, but was not, therefore, removed from the actual. When he told us, for instance, that we "Americans are almost incredibly romantic," he came to the core of a matter that so different a spirit as Professor Von Muensterberg laid bare more prosaically. In support of his theory of our romanticism, he once drew a picture of an American millionaire, a collector of precious objects, thus:

It was all, at bottom, in him, the esthetic principle, planted where it could burn with a cold, still flame; where it fed almost wholly on the material directly involved, on the idea (followed by appropriation) of plastic beauty, of the thing visibly perfect in its kind; where, in short, in spite of the general tendency of the "devouring element" to spread, the rest of his spiritual furniture, modest, scattered, and tended with unconscious care, escaped the consumption that in so many cases proceeds from the undue keeping-up of profane altar-fires.

He made, in that paragraph, considerable concession to his notion of the romance in the American character. The similarity to Pater's phrase about the "hard, gem-like flame" was doubtless unpremeditated; it may even have been part of a fine ironic intention.

The paragraph, at any rate, brings me to that book by Mr. James in which he expanded his opinions about us as a nation, and as a society. If I have not room to indicate the many volumes of essays on art, on literature, and on travel, that Mr. James had given us over



and above his analysis, in the novel-form, of the American, the English and the international social spirit, I yet must find room for some reference to his volume on "The American Scene." His stature as a man of letters was there once again defined.

Never before had such wealth and such finesse of observation been accorded our civilisation, Mr. James saw us both as one of ourselves and as a foreigner. He viewed us in the light of his own early Americanism, as well as in the comparative light of his later cosmopolitan, critical self. Plainness and clearness were everywhere in this book; those who pretended weariness over Mr. James's reluctance to be obvious, to be dogmatic in face of a multitude of relativities, must have been hopelessly prejudiced or lazy.

Our manner and our manners most interested him. There were no statistics about shipping, or railroads, or wealth. It was the type of people we were, the type of thought and life we lead, that interested this observer. He noted, about life in New England, for instance, the difference made in that land of long winters "by the suppression of the two great factors of the familiar English landscape, the squire and the parson." The feminine, almost Italian, texture of the New England landscape impressed him; the occasional sordidness of its proper inhabitants, and its general air of appeal, in hope of future, of prosperity, to the Summer visitors. Similarly, having wondered at the awful speed with which we assimilate—or not—the alien, he found that alien, in New York, and elsewhere, the triumphant type, the Americans of age and standing seeming patiently to be surrendering, to be accepting a secondary place behind that alien.

Into his distress about the dominant architecture in New York entered the sense that nothing about it was final. Where an ugly house now stands, a still uglier one might stand in twenty years. He pointed, from

Riverside Drive and elsewhere, to the grossly defacing railway, and observed that in any American scene the authority of the railway "sits enthroned," and that apparently "the country exists for the cars," not the cars for the country. If he had fathomed the dominance of our railroads, not only over our landscapes, but over the lives and comforts of thousands of our citizens, how much more might not Mr. James have been distressed!

He found our men failing to keep step, socially, with our women. Our society he summed up briefly, elaborating what he had often said in other places: "It takes an endless amount of history to make even a little tradition, and an endless amount of tradition to make even a little taste, and an endless amount of taste, by the same token, to make even a little tranquillity,"—and it is that which our body social lacks. How sadly disenchanted, reminiscent, was his chapter on Newport, now become, in contrast to its one-timed leisured, critical cosmopolitanism, "a mere breathing place for white elephants"! What charming pages were those, based on his experience in the Baltimore Country Club, in which he discoursed so illuminatingly upon the apotheosis of the Family as seen in the country club province of American manners!

What was there, finally, in all this book, from which I have taken pains to quote typical turns, that was obscure, or difficult?

Yet, I realise that the nonconformists will hardly conform. There will always be Jacobites and Whigs. Perhaps we are a futile, pathetic crew, we Jacobites. Still—we are! Outmoded, perhaps, but still—Jacobites!

Jacobites, and being so, drinking now and again to "the King over the water"!

Only one detail about Mr. James all true Jacobites must ever regret, and that is Edith Wharton.

At first, even in the most bitter moments of one's

critical chagrin, one presumed her Jacobite affiliations of style mere passing philandery. To play the sedulous ape, as we knew from Stevenson, had been the making of more than one eventually individual stylist. But this writer is now long past the formative period, and we are still confronted by a fixed habit, a confirmed vice. Jacobite English about Jacobite subjects is all she cares to engage in. Hers, indeed, is the most abnormal case we know of one artist being wedded to the art of another.

Of all esthetic shibboleths perhaps the most cowardly is the one which declares So-and-so to be wedded to his or her art. Next to the one about "seeing life," this is the most abominable of pretexts. There comes a person too lazy to use good manners, too selfish to conform to decent custom; what is the excuse? "Wedded to art!" There comes between man and wife this or that dissension; what is the excuse of the well-meaning idiots who always prove their friendship by free discussion of others' troubles? "Wedded to art." You have only to recall the case of Emma Eames and Julian Story, one a singer, the other a painter. Both, said their friends—and here you must imagine a shoulder-shrug in the correct manner of the boulevard!—had, alas, the artistic temperament. The artistic temperament . . . ! Our forthright friends in Germany hit that nail on the head some years ago, in a merry little ditty which put "artistic temperament" on the same plane, linguistically and actually, as some of those "actresses" whose chief appearances are made in the police-courts.

How went the doggerel again?

"Man muss patent sein,  
Voll Temperament sein,  
So'n bischen tra-la-la, la-la, la-la. . . ."

Especially the detail indicated by the concluding myosis. "Artistic temperament," nine times out of ten, is simply

a synonym for being "a bad lot." To the subject of the artistic temperament, of bohemianism, etc., I mean to devote some space in a later chapter. For the moment we are concerned with only Mrs. Wharton's artistic temperament, which resulted in her being hopelessly wedded to the art of Henry James.

Quite aside from style, she enveloped all she touched in a thick Jacobean atmosphere, in which nothing human, not even an emotion, could stir. If any of her heroes and heroines had ever escaped out of that fog into real life, they would easily have overcome all the difficulties her prose presented; they would have wedded each other and not Mrs. Wharton's art.

For that was always a sort of bigamy, or proxy affair, at best; since Mrs. Wharton's art was really Mr. James's art—and the rest you may find in Euclid, which is also an element, like the element of Mrs. Wharton's books, in which nothing whatever happens, except such things as, in the old Punch phrase, "we might have wished differently put."

## CHAPTER SIX

THAT Henry James cannot be claimed altogether by America is generally admitted. He reached his stature as a man of letters only after he ceased subjecting himself to the conditions of American literature. He was American only in this: his birth, his use of American subject matter, and his writing the American as often as the English language. As a man of letters we have tried to place him, however, curtly. The detail of his language leads to a subject that has interested me profoundly, namely:

The question of our language, written and spoken.

The colloquialisms, English and American, that Mr. James used so artistically, will serve to lead us gradually to slang, and to the various crimes committed in America against spoken and printed speech.

As a propagator of American colloquialisms Mr. James became notable early in his career. Slang, as we know, always runs the risk of becoming what the provincial terms dictionary English. The process of sloughing off the coat of slangdom, and developing as language, is an unconscious one, and one in which the majority of speaking and writing people are only automatic factors. Occasionally, however, a conscious professor of the art airs the courage of his convictions about some new colloquialism deserving use in literature. Professor Brander Matthews, for instance, attacked this subject in his volume called "Parts of Speech," and elsewhere. He teetered politely from one side of the case to the other; he was amiably tolerant; and he entered into the most suave explanations. He argued that as language grew, so the time approached when the sheer numerical supremacy of



the American population would shift the central criterion for the spoken and written word from the English to the American side of the water.

These professors, you see, Brander Matthews and William James, agree that American literary and linguistic supremacy can be achieved by sheer force of numbers. Which same I consider a most dangerous fallacy.

Let me remind you again of the negro and the rabbit.

Though in the main Professor Matthews discussed the matter temperately and reasonably, you could pick plenty of flaws even in his tolerance. After bringing out his favorite statistical weapon, and declaring that as language is the tool of the people who use it, so it must sway to the custom of the majority, he regarded complacently the passing from common use of the subjunctive mood. There his own argument defeats him. It happens, in the case of the English subjunctive, that the mouths of the common people still preserve what the lettered professors seem so ready to surrender; the form "If you be going" can be heard constantly in New England.

The author of "Parts of Speech" made his book pleasantly readable, thereby fulfilling the first duty of his calling; but just as his arguments were often fallacious, so was the very language in which he discussed language. He was guilty of such metaphor as this: "The English language is the tool of the people who speak English and who have made it to fit their hands." Only a very dull person could refrain from wondering if the author of that talked with his hands.

Finally, in that book and for many years after, Professor Matthews, with many other professors of varying degrees, counseled the reform of our spelling. Now, in view of the abominable English heard in our supposedly most cultured places; of the utter absence of correct conversation in those teaching, much less those learning, English in our schools; all such pother about spelling has always struck me as supremely ridiculous. My friend

Charles F. Lummis, one of the few men on the continent with a real care for, and skill in, the language, having once had the Century Dictionary flung at him, retorted that he would engage, even at his normal rates, though dictionary writing was much harder than plain writing, "to supply a volume large enough to add to a set of the Century Dictionary, and devoted to a compact correction of the blunders—the sore and shameful blunders—of the Century Dictionary touching the English language as she is defined for the United States and the New World in general." Mr. Lummis's ire once started, he continued, in support of the main text upon which I write this book:

If so many good men would bother us as much with an attempt to teach the young men and women of this country to write something worth while, and in decent English, in almost any old spelling; or if they would combine their adamantine faces against the average output of books and magazines, erotic, neurotic and tommyrotic—or if they would do any other grown-up, two-fisted, useful thing, and let our poor old letters alone—I think they would better apply their industry.

A vigorous statement of the case. The latter part especially. With the former, even though it be but in its suggestion, I could quarrel, since it hints the so-called "school of writing" as permissible. In view of the quantity of bad English put out by the supposed professors of the art of writing, it is terrible to contemplate the result if they had pupils. What is needed is not schools or professors to teach writing, but a penitentiary for bad writers.

As against the doctrinal method employed by our professors, Mr. James's manner was far more artistic, far more convincing.

In that subtle conversational manner of his he simply *used* his newly found phrases; he blithely, gaily, put them

into his literary pages, and asked of his readers only that they admit his slang to be apt, and saving of time and verbiage. In that delicate way of his he went far further toward putting the hall-mark of literary respectability on certain American linguistic devices than anyone else had done. In his story "In the Cage," for instance, were such turns as "She had caught on," "I've seen the thing through," and "The other party had a pull," sitting amid the hot-house flowers of Mr. James's English.

He was always, in this respect, an apparent contradiction. In one breath he exhausted himself—or his reader—with tortuous complications of plot and mental stress; in the next he plied us with the most modern phrases, the most direct turns of slang. He kept a marvellous balance between the sheer literary instinct and the faculty of seizing and holding the newest *argot* of society or the street. If he gave us Americanisms, he also gave us the article of slang as England used it. One character in "In the Cage" averred that "it was impossible sufficiently to put it on," which, to the untraveled American, might have easily been sheer Greek. Written "pile it on," we would have had the American of it.

The question of American speech eventually engaged Mr. James more directly than in his novels. He brought home to us some of the vices in our speech by way of public lectures and the little volume called "The Question of Our Speech."

He touched, there, matter which has long irritated everyone who has taste and ear.

Nothing, not even what is written, more intimately concerns our literature than the manner in which our language is spoken. Quite aside from questions of academic correctness, the lack of beauty in our spoken tongue had long been painful to all who had ears of any sort of efficacy. The faults Mr. James most specifically deplored were by no means the only ones discernible. Just as in

the British manner of speech many absurd vices have been pointed out by the Irishman, Bernard Shaw, so in the American pronunciation which has the prestige of society there are the most exasperating mannerisms. These have never been sufficiently pointed out. One professor has discussed slang; H. Thurston Peck has defined some of the little touches denoting taste or the lack of it; but the detail of our speech being rotten at the top, so to say, has never been properly emphasised.

I have watched this evil growing for a decade and more. It was often most noticeable in the very persons who were sneering at whatever slang happened to be, at the moment, the habit for the man in the street. These experiences have taught me to doubt both the genuineness of the fashionables and the scholiasts; and until I can some day hear their actual pronunciation I keep my privilege of politely doubting our professors, just as I despise the fashionables who deliberately maim our speech.

The men and women in the parlor-cars, in the palm-rooms and gardens of our fashionable hotels, and in our floating palaces, are the ones who sin more grievously against our speech than do the most unlettered of the men of the street. They, moreover, have not the excuse of ignorance; theirs is conscious, purposed vice. It is as much more reprehensible as is the act of the skilful poisoner than the chance blow of passion. They deliberately defile and pollute our speech to feed what serves them as vanity, pride and egoism. Just as in the days of the Hotel Rambouillet the fine ladies and fine gentlemen were so refining the French language as to make it, had they succeeded, an idiom which only themselves could understand, so now our upper ten millions are in a fair way to turn the English language into a mumbo-jumbo.

For this fashionable mumbo-jumbo of the moment I have found a label which reads simply:

“ Hot Mush Talk.”

Onomatopoeias lead inevitably to that title. When first the sounds produced by these people in conversation strike the ear, they make the ingenuous listener fancy he has struck an assemblage of breakfast-food tasters. Each mouth is apparently full up with some hot, choking substance that prevents distinct utterance. You long, as you listen, for even the painfully precise, the sternly incisive syllabification of the Westerner; he, after all, does treat the language with reverence. The mush-mouthed folk of fashion and of millions deliberately debase the spoken medium.

It must have begun, I think, about the time that the Anglo-mania, first notably lampooned by Mrs. Burton Harrison, became observable in America. British and American fashionable regions were beginning the exchanges which have since grown to such importance and frequency. One of the first of those resulted in Americans landing in England with a twang, and returning with that twang made more abominable by the effort to inflect and produce the language as do Londoners of fashion. This curious importation grew and developed to an ugliness that is now nothing less than alarming. Compound of bastard Briticisms and inescapable nasalities, it is delivered from mouths apparently abrim with steaming porridge or whatever else of that sort might prevent actual articulation. The syllables cannot be really said to issue at all. They blend in one inchoate vowel sound; the consonants die before they are decently born. The whole method of speech employed by these mush-mouthers is a miscarriage of language.

It was my fate, not long ago, to cross on a fashionable Cunarder. Aboard were so many representatives of fashion and money, of all nationalities, that the newspapers had let loose, on sailing day, the *cliché* alleging an exodus of millionaires, which is used at least once a



week the year round by every newspaper printing the advertisements of the shipping companies.

Much as I may prefer, individually, the society of dogs, or even of books; in such cramped circumstances I found myself forced to hear, if not to see, certain idiosyncracies of some of those Americans whom the newspapers conspire to consider notable. So that, before fate and the harbor of Genoa finally took me from that environment, I began to hail with delight the English pronunciation of a South American Jew, of a Hungarian sportsman, and of a French *bonne*. They, at least, were trying for distinctness and clarity. My fellow-citizens were producing fog instead of consonants, and mush instead of vowels.

I despair of reproducing this lingo. A great field awaits the writer who will accurately print the spoken tongue of our most conspicuous people. I wonder Mrs. Wharton has not made the attempt. She tried Jacobite English; why not the English of mush-and-Manhattan?

To the thousands who for years have heard this fashionable perversion of pronunciation, there is no more need to explain the nature of this speech, than there is to explain the difference between Cockney and Cork. Still, since the literary, rather than the quotidian record, is in my mind, let me attempt the only possible reproduction of some of these mealy sounds that pass as fashionable American English; namely, by onomatopoeia.

"H w a h-y?" That is as near as they come to "How are you?"

"Lurrh-y pah-y!" is supposed to equal "Lovely party!"

Further specification will serve no purpose. Even onomatopoeia fails. Only the horrible phonograph could give back this horrible language. Its essentials are entire ellipsis of the significant consonants, and malformation of the vowels. On this main body, many equally vicious offenses are grafted. The person of casual fashion but constant apishness still lengthens the "a" in the

wrong place, and then, in the same breath, flats in full Philadelphia method; still indulges in foreign importations, abominably mismouthed; and therewith lapses everywhere and anywhere into the most amusing provincialisms.

In fine, our spoken American language is threatened from the top down. Slang and all the perishing inventions of the vulgate do not menace one tithe as sombrely as does this mannered mouthing by the plutocrats. An amusing series of articles was once printed upon the Poor Taste of the Rich in household decoration and furnishing. But it is not, happily, incumbent on the ordinary person of intelligence to penetrate to the Penates of the enmilioned. That same person, however, cannot always escape the sound of the enmillioned creature's speech.

Listening to such people, apparently the most fortunate of our citizens, one wonders whence has arisen the international superstition about American culture. It is too large a matter for my present canvas; it is matter for an entire book; I hope I may not have to write it! Just now I must content myself with emphasising the fact that, until our moneyed minority, to say nothing of our average millions, show some concern for spoken English, the professorial argument that written literature can come out of sheer numbers is rather a sorry thing.

At one end of the scale is the millionaire and his hot-mush talk; at the other is Mr. James's triumphant alien, taking the conqueror's liberty with our language. Is it not a pleasant picture? And out of that, if you please, they expect literature!

Is there no middle class—using the term (lest too much fur fly!) as applicable to intelligence or to posterity? Of course there is! And again there comes a figure from that gallery of disenchantment I call Memory. There boarded another liner, not so long ago, at Dover, a Vision, a perfect vision. A *Daisy Miller* of Twenty Years After. Figure and face of a charm; gown of a perfection, that

only America plus Paris can achieve. Well, we were not fairly out of the Channel before those exquisitely chiseled lips had opened to set loose their store of disenchantment. A year or so in Europe, I assure you, had done nothing save make rather a varied idiot out of a simple one. With all the chances for enlightenment—for learning all those “little touches” Professor Peck has praised—which twelve months abroad must offer even the most benighted, this Vision, entirely surrounded by Money and males, had gathered little save this conclusion:

“I don’t know how I’m ever going to stand it in Cincinnati again! I just had the grandest time; I guess we were invited most every place, on the Riverrira, and all. Honest, I never went to bed till three all the time we were away. I’m just crazy about Europe.”

Murdering the French language with an accent which had never yet achieved decent English, the Vision prattled gay worse-than-nothings blithely, quite innocent of the fact that after listening to her for ten minutes every self-respecting male, unless hopelessly blinded by physics, had to use much self-repression to keep from murdering her. Regarding her, one realised that *Daisy Miller* is an eternal type.

The only difference between Henry James’s heroine and her newer version is that the latter would make no bones about writing a novel. It would never occur to her that ability to think logically and talk properly had anything to do with so easy a thing as writing. Why, surely, anybody can write! Yes, and as we regard results, it often seems that—criticism being a dead letter—some of the people writing books must be people who, in any really cultured society, simply would never be allowed to open their mouths, much less put pen to paper.

If I offered specimens of the rubbish shot almost weekly in book form, parading as English prose, or as human dialogue, there would be no room for anything else. But a few gems are too glittering to keep from you; they

may prove to you my contention that when people who know no more of life or of human speech than these are permitted to print books, a few publishers should be burnt in the market-place for the general good of literature.

You will recall the impossible speech that Lucas Malet put into the mouth of the heroine of "Sir Richard Calmady," as quoted on page 38. One, Annie E. Holdsworth, comes into competition for the cap and bells with a similar speech, in a gaudy paste imitation of a book that she called "A New Paola and Francesca." She made her heroine talk like this, describing her own thoughts:

They are like the wind harping in the high boughs of the pines. They are like the wind, swift-footed, folding wide spaces about it like a garment. They are like the wind, restless, moaning in the night with the burden of the souls that sin. And again, they are like the wind, wistful as the kiss you give a newborn baby.

It is needless to say that no sane person ever talked like that.

Such stilted and shoddy stuff is especially damnable in dialogue. Let an author, as the artist behind the scene, write as fine as can be; that is quite another matter. Hewlett writes pages of sheerly beautiful artistry; but who writes directer, more human dialogue? Nor, in the case of this Holdsworth person, have we the excuse of the novice. She was hardened; she had written several novels, so-called. She was simply one of those who wilfully distorted spoken language in the belief that doing so made literature. There are a great many victims of that disease.

Top-hat Prose is what I have called it.

Even so accomplished an artist as A. W. Pinero indulges, in play after play, in this top-hat prose. He makes his characters, time and again, talk "like a book."

That good critic, A. B. Walkley, pointed this out, giving many an amusing specimen of the playwright's too literary dialogue. Mr. Pinero probably did this deliberately; we know that in the theatre there is a theory that everything must be emphasised or your audience will lose it. In literature there is no such exculpating theory possible. The only reason such stuff gets printed is that our publishers and our public have so far prevented the foolkiller from doing his duty.

Mr. William Dean Howells remarked only the other day, in the course of an effort to be optimistic about American literature, that this was not an age in which literary masterpieces were published. When even so hardy a meliorist as Mr. Howells makes such an admission, you will see how just are my animadversions against things as they are. Several other things he admitted which amused me; his remarks were published at the very moment of my writing this. He admitted our writers lacked good taste. What else have I tried to prove in those examples of salacity cited? The subject was beside the case; the good taste, and true art—those were conspicuously lacking; that lack was the typical defect which I deplored. Mr. Howells, again, regretted the fact that “popular success” was all our writers aimed for. “Find me,” said I, when I began this book, “any tendency in our letters save the commercial!” And now, even before all my facts are marshaled, Mr. Howells supports my argument. For this, much thanks!

Throughout that interview Mr. Howells, striving constantly for kindness, still let the truth shine through the lines. You could read in his optimism quite as hearty an arraignment, quite as sorrowful an admission, of our defects of taste and art, as the most prejudiced censor could achieve. He concluded, however, with the fine old allegation that our annual average was high, and that probably no writer ever really intended to write badly.

Ah, those good old lies, how hard they die! Whatever



Australia may say to the contrary some day the rabbit family will undoubtedly produce a genius? . . . And we are to pardon the person who, lacking taste or even decent English, rushes into print, simply on the score that his intentions may be good? We must not point the finger of scorn at these inrushing fools hell-bent with books for paving stones? Why so timid, Mr. Howells? Why these half-truths?

If we allow such stilted and shoddy dialogue, such top-hat prose, as that of Annie E. Holdsworth, or Louis M. Elshemus, or scores of others, to go unrebuked, how can we expect the vast army of the half-educated, who are trying to help their crude state by indiscriminate reading, to be saved from intellectual damnation?

There is always, especially in so huge an army as that of American readers, constantly recruiting from the but lately quite unlettered, a great mass which prefers shoddy to genuine, and mistakes exaggeration for conviction. It regards exuberance of rhetoric, spoken or written, as the finest flower of thought and expression. So it comes that with a certain type of mind plain, direct, Anglo-Saxon is anything but the mark of Literature with a large L. These hold that to write just as people talk is to demean the Jovian possibilities of the language; they prefer the elaborately ornate and grandiose.

They worship Top-hat Prose.

How else can we account for the popularity of those who supply the shoddy, the stilted, the unreal? If it were not for the eternal apishness in our majority, those fakers of English could not survive. That apishness is proven in much that is spoken by the people, to refer back, for a moment, to that subject. The provincial, of Harlem or of Hackensack, imitates a tongue compound of American stage speech and the bastard English spoken by our fashionables; those come newly from the interior imitate the Harlem imitation; and our fash-

ionables imitate their dream of London speech. The dream is a nightmare, and the whole vicious circle of imitation results in nightmare.

I wonder if Mr. Howells would counsel pardon, on the score of good intentions, to such a person as Louis M. Elshemus, for instance?

Here was one whose authority to write about manners, and whose manner of writing, were exposed thus:

"He stopped at a swell boarding hotel, where only the elite of society resorted."

"Such is the ludicrous side of the *nouveaux riches* etiquette. My goodness! speak of monarchy? Plutocracy eclipses that!"

Was it not easy to see, in this atmosphere of "buggies," "buckboards," of the "swell" and the "elite" that in the author of "A Triple Flirtation," which by permission of our damnable public patience was called a book, we had a social satirist of sorts? Do you note the exquisite taste in those brief extracts, the exact echo of fashionable phraseology? In the drawing-rooms of our best people this was the sort of English used? No; even I have not accused our fashionables of that!

Was it not typical that such a book could get printed? Here was a person so impudent that he could write "American girls deem politeness rank idiocy," and could discuss the "extravagances in the manners of the *nouveaux riches*," without being able to write a decent sentence in the English language. Yet Mr. Howells would have this sort pardoned on the score of good intentions! A fellow of such monumental lack in humor that he could criticise a whole society in terms that would make the fortune of an Ollendorff, an Ahn, or the Rogers Brothers! You know the true saying that clear thinking means good writing? Apply the test to this graceful specimen of fog from Mr. Elshemus:

Two persons possessed with a versatile nature understand each other so well they need no introduction; observing each other's actions, they at once are aware that they are similar, and the mere eye-glance tells to them that they are equally well gifted; thus it is how friendship grows rapidly between them, and this friendship is lasting; their gifts and various powers lie on the same fields till their death.

"Thus it is," in short, that Mr. Elshemus's case yearned for the foolkiller. There are perfections of various sorts, of course; and being a perfect idiot may be a distinction; but is that a license to print?

One of the wonders of this world will always be why so many of the misguided creatures who think they can write invariably approach subjects of which they are especially ignorant. It took no more than a page or two of "A Triple Flirtation" to disclose the fact that its author's intelligence was that of a kitchen maid, yet he could not leave fashionable life alone. He called it names, after proving he knew nothing about it. He tried to suggest a libertine, and did it thus: "When a young man he already enjoyed the society of women, and oft-times was he brought home earlier than was his wont."

Yet, because of possible good intentions, we were to pardon such stuff? Here was a thing masquerading as a book, written in terms that any graduate of a village school should have been ashamed of. Instead of English, here was jargon; and the views of life expressed sounded like the observations of a socialistic footman. There never was a more flagrant instance of the frauds that our too great tolerance allows. If the Salmagundi Club had to listen to this sort of thing, it was pity enough; but that it should be permitted as a book—that is a crime which demands castigation. Admirable as is the attitude of Mr. Howells, it is yet the prevalence of that very attitude which has left the gates of our literature so undefended against the fools.

The case of the author of "A Triple Flirtation" was

an extreme one of a hopeless and amateurish bungler. This person simply did not know the rudiments of clear thinking. He had no right whatever to be allowed into print.

But Top-hat Prose is written, as we saw in the case of Pinero, by many whom we would never have suspected of it. I shall cite one specimen of it by a clergyman, another by an author who was once praised by *Punch*.

In the case of the clergyman it was the fine, mouth-filling, polysyllabic style. Thus spake a young woman in Charles Van Norden's novel called "Yoland of Idle Isle":

"Pauline, who is that fine gentleman at the other end of the veranda, of such imperious manners, who constantly glances this way and so boldly, and who lingers there in view of my little levee? I do not recognise him and I dislike him. He impresses me as overbearing."

Given imperturbable good humor, you could laugh at this book for the same reason that you laugh at a bellow-drama of the "Jessie Left the Village" sort, screaming at its unintentional absurdities; but if you consider it as English, as prose, as print, as something pretending to thought or speech, you can only hate the people who conspire to let such stuff get printed.

Again, in a story, that London *Punch* had the hardihood to commend, entitled "Susan," was this speech from the hero:

"A thousand curses on their heads who have brought us all to this! . . . Gertrude Langley, for five weeks I have loved you, and there is no woman in the world, save you, that I ever did love, or ever shall. . . ."

"Gertrude Langley, etc.," wasn't it exactly like the fine mouthfuls of name they give one another on the Bowery stage? If our hero had loved his *Gertrude* for five weeks he should have known better than to address

her as if she were in the witness-box, or at the end of the factory's bread-line.

I do not for a moment deny that there are people who talk like that, but I deny that they should be allowed about, especially not in print.

In any new civilisation the period of polysyllabic speech is as inevitable as any other form of pubescence. You have only a little to keep your ears open to realise that the less people know of their own language the more stiltedly they try to mouth it. The nearest Chautauqua will supply all the half-cultured English you may want to sample. It may not be necessary to quarrel with this period; if there were never a course of sprouts to go through, the finished growth might never be reached. Unless one happens to be at sea with them, as I said before, we do not have to listen to these people. It is an unfortunate fact that a great many of them—having decided that by virtue of their own mentally unlicked condition they are fit to become teachers of other people's children—are able to travel abroad from time to time and so spread the European notion that we are a nation without either manners or mannered speech. They go about, using their interminable words, dwelling ponderously on every syllable as if they were suspected of not knowing its spelling; always asking people where they "reside," or when they "retire"; never using a simple Saxon word when a long Latin one is in their rag-bag of undigested "culture"; and all that the rest of us can do is to escape the sound of them as best we may.

In print it is not so easy to escape these people, and in print they are a very pestilence. For beneath every lowest stratum of half-culture there are always yet lower strata; and if we let people who think crudely and talk clumsily get those thoughts and speeches into print, those who are still more ignorant may seriously take the result as literature. Such long-winded hogwash, through its



very bombast, its familiarity with magniloquent phrases, impresses the entirely unlettered far more than does really simple and beautiful art. So the vicious chain may wind on, one bit of bombast breeding another. No law, no critical censorship, could possibly be severe enough, to prevent such rubbish getting into print. Do you say that nobody is compelled to read? No; but the great majority is without taste; it does not know one book from another; it picks up one as easily as another; the paid eulogists of the newspapers are as eloquent for the bad as for the good; and, as just noted, bombast impresses the uneducated far more than does anything else.

One of my specimens of polysyllabic bombast was written by an American clergyman. That such a man should preach a heaven seems cruelty even to the half-cultured; the printed evidence shows he thinks in terms of bombast, and is no more entitled, by that token, to minister to the minds of his fellow-men than is the savagest barbarian that ever crooned over glass beads.

You may reproach me with losing my temper about a very little matter. But if I have proved anything at all it is that it is one of the fundamental things that is the matter with our literature, that we let in every Tom, Dick and Harry who thinks he can write as easily as he breathes. You may also remind me that publishers often have nothing to do with such books as I have just been quoting from; that such books are really printed by the authors, who simply pay for the publisher's imprint. Quite true; yet, if it miss the publishers, the indictment still holds against the newspapers, who do nothing to prevent such frauds. The policy of absolute silence would kill such stuff as surely as censure.

Meanwhile—the gates swing open, and the fools rush in.

Almost any excuse will do. The reasons which prompted the Elshemus and Van Norden attempts at authorship I

do not know; but one of the most naive confessions came, I remember, from Philadelphia. A Philadelphia merchant, Mr. Finley Acker, having "done Egypt," his friends requested the publication of his articles in book form. Ah—what a dead past, or what visions of Philadelphia, rise at sound of those fine shibboleths, of those who "consent to write" and are "requested to publish"!

Surely the age of consent, in this particular, too, should be fixed by law!

For this was what our consenting Philadelphian observed in serious print:

The water of the Nile is more murky than either the Schuylkill or the Delaware, but when it appears as drinking water upon the table it is as clear as crystal, and the wonderful transformation from offensive muddiness into crystalline purity is due to the simple process of filtration.

Could you more clearly have crystallised a reproach to Philadelphia—which unfortunately it has not yet heeded—with an elaboration on the statement that two and two make four?

Let me go further, and declare that, critically considered, ours is the Age of Consent.

The vice of literary affectation is terribly insidious. Men who are by nature blunt and true become, the moment they touch pen and ink, stilted and tortuous. Personally, some of our most Awful Examples may be direct and decent folk,—though it is main hard to think so. The writing itch distorts all but the strongest characters. Only the most determined artist, the one who has overcome many temptations, sifted away much chaff, succeeds in simplicity. Yet simplicity is often the finest style of all. In my chapter on style I took what may seem an opposing view; but I was making really to the same conclusion.

The theory of simplicity in art was once, however, exposed to ridicule. Since the case of Mr. Hamlin Gar-

land included the writing of much absurd and impossible dialogue, it comes properly into this discussion.

When you assert that no man who has not plowed should ever write about plowing, it is a pity if your realism, your truth to life and speech, fails you so utterly that your attempt to reproduce English speech results in pure nonsense. Time and again Mr. Garland, who for years preached naturalism and sincerity to all the rest of us, wrote, as the speech of Englishmen, such sounds as no human being in either Old or New England ever evolved. So doing, he made valueless all the theories he had been preaching so many years. Why could he not have stuck to his plows and other Western implements? He was at home there; he put simple and true art into his treatment of that material; why could he not have left alone the things he was ignorant of? Applying his own preachment, no man who is ignorant of the British accent should try to reproduce it. But Mr. Garland printed these words, as part of an Englishman's speech:

"Cawn't—kneow—abeout—proveoking—deont.

"Your blawsted sentimentality seems note to do you any harm."

Mr. Garland's notion of English speech would be amusing to English people, but the case is really far more serious than that. This incorrect, absurd, reproduction of an impossible accent, amounts to an indictment against the truth of his entire art. A man who, in the matter of an accent, can stray so far from truth, may be deceiving the reader at every other point. The whole fabric of his vaunted realism, veritism, naturalism—or whatever he calls his method—falls to the ground when he so completely proves the insincerity of his art.

Which was the more saddening if we recalled that he, of all writers, had forever gone about suspecting the sincerity of his fellows.

But for that lecturing attitude of his, Mr. Garland's licentious invention of impossible dialogue would not be so

immensely funny. Lecturing, however, was something he never could refrain from; both from the platform and in print he tried to spread his notions as to both material and manner proper to literary art. All of which made it the more imperative that in his own art he should avoid the first principles of the unconsciously absurd.

Surely there was never anything much more funny than an apostle of Chicago culture finding fault with the King's English!

No disrespect, mind you, to Chicago! For Chicago itself saw the ridiculousness of Mr. Garland, and we must thank one of its artists for the most delicious satire ever aimed at Mr. Garland.

Henry B. Fuller, it is true, belongs to Chicago only by an accident of residence; as an artist, he was one of our half dozen American stylists. His art was of no special time or place; it was fine and delicate manipulation of beautiful prose, except only where he let Chicago enter into his subject matter. His "Chevalier of Pensieri Vani" was a triumph of prose; it proved everything I hinted in my chapter on Style; it will outlive all the "best sellers" of the last fifteen years. What satire Mr. Fuller was capable of, his sketch of *Abner Joyce* in his book called "Under the Skylights," I must try to brief for you. The sketch, line on line, touch after touch, hit off Mr. Hamlin Garland so patly, that it belongs in our present argument. It was a document in the history of American culture and American literature.

Here, in outline, is Mr. Fuller's sketch of *Abner Joyce*:

Intense earnestness was the keynote of his art and his life. The world, and especially the town, was a riot of ills crying to be mended; he was strenuous for its reformation. Civilised society made him ill; the only thing that did not make him ill was his own work. He had no sense of humor, and nobody was sincere but himself. Clubs, to him, were "places where the profligate children

of Privilege drank improper drinks and told improper stories and kept improper hours. *Abner*, who was perfectly pure in word, thought and deed, and always in bed betimes, shrank from a club as from a lazaret." He refused wine at dinner; he would not wear the conventional dinner clothes. (He was, in short—this is not Mr. Fuller's, but my own, suggestion—the Keir Hardie of Chicago. Or, again, you may compare his case to Bernard Shaw's, if you have not too much regard for the latter. In Keir Hardie's case, the radical quieted down at approach of worldly and political success; in the American instance, marriage achieved the same result; you may find that age-old process, that transformation of "Soll Und Haben" on every page of the world's history.)

*Abner*, in fact, was a person who ought to have been kicked. His body, however, was as rugged as his spirit; in youth he had followed the plow. But even a veritist, a sermoniser on "sincerity," had to bow to the inevitable when it took the form of woman. He married, thereafter took wine, dressed decently, and talked no more of his own books than others'.

Mr. Fuller's book, in which was this sketch, was full of delicate and discriminating combinations of appreciation and satire aimed at the booming quest for culture in Chicago. Here was Culture spelt with a very large C. Since Mr. Fuller wrote his romances of Italy, he had done nothing so graceful as this, both for satire and sympathy. The struggling artists in that western environment drew his sympathy, as surely as the material atmosphere of the western metropolis drew his satire. Above all, the clear character-sketch of *Abner* showed how exquisitely Mr. Fuller had enjoyed the artistic attitudinising of Mr. Garland.

In artistic attitudinising there are several sorts. There was the posturing of Oscar Wilde. There was the Top-hat Attitude of the charlatans and the prigs. And there



was also, if I may coin a term to cap an opposite, the Sombrero Attitude. Joaquin Miller, years before, had impressed Europe with that attitude. He was a genius; Mr. Garland was not; yet his attitude was the Sombrero Attitude.

In *Abner Joyce* Mr. Fuller drew that attitude to the life.

There was the passage, already quoted, anent *Abner's* severe purity; the theory of veritism, dictating the creation of farm-fiction only to writers who had been farmers, was equally a part of this life-like picture. A new book by *Abner* was described "as gloomy, strenuous and positive as its predecessor"; which latter had contained a dozen stories "twelve clods of earth gathered, as it were, from the very fields across which he himself, a farmer's boy, had once guided the plough." Could Mr. Garland's "Main Traveled Roads" have been more clearly pointed out? Then we were made to note the humorlessness of *Abner*, shying at the light-heartedness of other art-students,—"*Abner* found it hard to countenance such facetiousness in a world so full of pain." *Abner's* distrust of the sincerity of others was exposed time and again, just as was Mr. Garland's.

I remember turning to Mr. Garland once, as we were passing what was then Hooley's Theatre in Chicago, and calling his attention to the fact that a play of Jerome K. Jerome's was to be seen there.

"Ah," said Mr. Garland sadly, "do you think he is sincere?"

For the similar speech made to Richard Harding Davis, I cannot vouch, but it has long been current in print and out.

"Why don't you," said the older man, reproachfully, to the author of *Van Bibber*, "dig deeper?"

Mr. Fuller, on the same text, gave us a young painter, jeered at for painting Watteau marquises, saying to *Abner*:

"I'll paint my next sitter as a milkmaid—if she'll let me."  
"As a milkmaid?" said Abner. "No; paint the milkmaid herself. Deal with the verities. Like them before you paint them. Paint them because you like them."

Only the folk who prefer art jargon to art itself, who advertise sincerity without having it, can have found anything but delight in "Chevalier" Fuller's sketch of *Abner Joyce*. I cannot leave the subject without repeating a story Mr. John McGovern was wont to tell at about the same time that he anticipated Dr. Osler's theory as to the uselessness of men over forty years of age. Mr. McGovern had gone further; he had voiced loudly the Spartan belief that all over forty should be killed. For these and many other reasons, you should remember Mr. McGovern, who worked many years for the welfare of the English language. Circumstances and Chicago kept his efforts futile; but if for nothing else than his impatience with the *Abner Joyces* of this world, as expressed in the following story, he deserved remembrance:

In the days before Mr. Garland came East from Chicago, bringing his hand-made laurels with him, Mr. McGovern arose one morning with a dull, far-off noise haunting his hearing. "I heard someone," he said, "a-beating of a drum." He proceeded down town. To the accompaniment of the car-wheels there came again that rumbling, incessant sound, that someone "a-beating of a drum." He went to his newspaper office; still upon his ears fell that monotonous and endless droning. Still "someone was a-beating of a drum." Sadly, as one haunted, he went at last to a club much frequented by writers. And there, in the Press Club, concluded the *trovatore*,

"Was Hamlin Garland a-beating of his drum."

Lest I be suspected, in my railing against ridiculous,

impossible, and therefore inartistic, dialogue in literature, of accusing Americans out of all due proportion, let me hasten to say that English authors, attempting American speech, have committed just as silly blunders. F. Frankfort Moore, for instance, in "According to Plato," a deadly tiresome effort to imitate the sparkle of Hichens and Shaw, once made an American girl say this:

"I don't desiderate a civil war."

Which, of course, whatever the man's position in the literary market-place may be, branded him as a bungler.

There were plenty of cases like that, of stories pretending to be satires on American life, so stupidly unreal that only the most boundless ignorance on the part of the British publishers or public could ever have let them into print; but to cite more instances would only tire all concerned.

What I chiefly deduce is that this literary buncombe is of all vices the most harmful. The tendency to "write fine," which once led even so forthright a soul as Col. Henry Inman of Kansas, after beginning by declaring, in his own proper, plain speech, "I have been requested by several parties to offer something of Kit Carson's early days on the plains," into such stuff as "the brilliant constellations of the incomparable June night, nursing her through its silent watches," has spoilt many a book which, written naturally, might have been written well, and, "written fine," was an inartistic abomination. Call it buncombe; or as did Mark Twain in his early, most jovial days, "hogwash"; or "dictionary language"; or, as I do, Top-hat Prose; it is always the same thing, and always pestilent.

Compared to it, the introduction of even the most slangy colloquialisms was a positive virtue. Not always were the colloquial accretions to our American language recorded as deftly as by Henry James. Yet often in the most outrageous slang we had to admit literary possibili-

ties. Sigh as we might, for instance, for the cloistral cadences of a Walter Pater, we had to admit, if we were normal human beings, the actuality, and so the art, of such pages as "Dooley" Dunne, and "Shorty McCabe" Ford, and "Artie" Ade, and "Billy Baxter" gave us. In all of this humorous slang the exact tone and thought of so many plain Americans was so caught and held, that these books had as much value for the philologist as for the lovers of laughter.

Since the others are still very much with us—often too much so, indeed!—Wm. J. Kountz, Jr., is the only one of those distributors of slang whom I would ask you to remember particularly. All he ever wrote is in the slim ninety-page volume of "Billy Baxter's Letters," but that was so spontaneous, so vocal with what passes for wit with the American Man in the Street, that he should be added to the roll of American humorists. Mr. Kountz died before his booklet was cold.

Whether such slang, such colloquialism, becomes language, or belongs to literature or not, of this I am sure; it does no such harm as do the Hot-Mush talk of our fashionables and the Top-Hat Prose of our literary pretenders.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

AGAINST slang, and against dialect—against any departure from pure English, in fact—one man in America has constantly turned his face. He was the one commanding figure in America in our time; the only American, living in America, who was completely a man of letters, in the finest sense of that term, and who had written what his contemporaries, as well as posterity, must admit as masterpieces.

His name is Ambrose Bierce.

Time and again he inveighed against the “illiterate bumpkins” “who think they get close to nature by depicting the sterile lives and limited emotions of the sod-hoppers that speak only to tangle their tongues,” having special reference to the Mary Wilkinsons, Mary Murfrees, James Whitcomb Rileys and Will Carletons. About dialect, as distinct from slang and the crimes against colloquialism I have been pointing out, I do not mean to argue; I leave it for a much pleasanter task; giving Mr. Bierce his critical due.

It is easily possible that you have never heard of Ambrose Bierce. If your notion of American literature has been gained from perusal of the “best sellers” of the last quarter of a century or so, that is more than possible.

Ambrose Bierce, the only one of our men of letters sure to be heard of, side by side with Poe and Hawthorne, when our living ears are stopped with clay, committed, for most of his life, the fatal mistake of being, as well as a literary genius, a great journalist. The greatest satirist since Swift, or Pope, or Byron, he



lashed, in prose and verse, always the sinners rather than the sin. That, in this soda-fountain age of ours, was a cardinal offense in the eyes of those little sisters of the rich who say what American literature shall be.

As journalist, Ambrose Bierce was the sole survivor from a period of great journalism.

As a writer of short stories he towered above his generation. When all our current letters are just where to-day the popular books of the 'Seventies and 'Eighties are, Ambrose Bierce's thin volume of stories "In the Midst of Life" will still be a great book; no other American book written in the last fifty years will survive so long.

Upon that I stake my own critical reputation.

Having said so much, as succinctly as I can, let me (supposing my reader to be one of those who have been blithely unconscious of our age and our land harboring a genius fit to rank with the other geniuses of recent times—with De Maupassant, with Verestchagin, and with Kipling) set down such adequate critical estimate of this great figure in American literature as is his due.

I am well aware of Walter Blackburn Harte's fine monograph on Bierce in the "*New England Magazine*," of Boston, some fifteen years ago; but I am equally well aware that just as that critic was never properly appreciated—which is something to which I shall presently call your special attention—so his monograph was but poorly circulated.

I said that Bierce was a journalist. He survived, indeed, from an age when we had such deserving the name. Before our newspapers became mere maws sucking in news and spewing it out, we had great personalities, and fine prejudices. Raymond, Greeley and Prentice were of that type; in California were Frank Pixley and Ambrose

Bierce, who between them made the San Francisco *Argonaut* into the best weekly paper on the continent. These were all men of strong personalities, strong prejudices. What is, to-day, most the matter with both our literature and our journalism is that they are without either of those two vitalising qualities. Critically, as I cannot often enough point out, the impersonal manner is impossible in our present sophistication. That manner appeals only to the type of critic who is himself torn by doubts; who harks back, always, to some dim hallucination, compound of tottering judgment and of conventional views which, lazily adopted by such of his critical ancestors as were unoriginal, are now lumped together under the phrase classical; he calls this hallucination a Standard.

Bierce, in journalism, always wielded hearty prejudices and discovered a vigorous personality. He was the journalist whose every line is also literature.

I do not forget the black eye the word journalist has long worn on our side of the water. One of the results of that indiscriminate hospitality to the incompetent which has for many decades marked our world of printer's ink, was that all amateurs, using the word in its more vulgar and corrupt sense, invariably called themselves, while they hung on to the fringes of newspaper life, journalists. So it came about that many of the real workers in the vineyard conceived a genuine hatred for the word. You may recall, however, that Rudyard Kipling, Bernard Shaw and Gilbert Chesterton have often been accused of being, rather than men of letters, glorified journalists. Ambrose Bierce may be mentioned in just that same breath, in just that same way. As a critic he always satisfied his prejudices, often recklessly; but how great was the journalism, the literature, that resulted!

Do you think I confuse the terms? No; in criticism—and Bierce was essentially a critic, when he was not poet or tale-teller—the journalistic is the only manner

that achieves results. The cloistered attitude in criticism is hopelessly futile. We write for the world we live in; if we believe we write for another, the virtue is gone from us before we set pen to paper. Only in the vitality that comes from addressing with living lips a living audience has the thing itself any value. Adopt the academic, the impersonal; weigh all things fine in the scale of your knowledge of the past and your notion of posterity,—and the criticism you give birth to is as useful as a question mark or a stutter.

The only domain of art into which it might be dangerous to extend this test is poetry. Mr. Bierce himself is loftily Parnassian on that point. The Parnassians become scornful if you suggest that between the world we live in, between the men and women next door to the room we inhabit, and the color of great poetry, there should be any correlation whatever; they would keep the matter and manner of true poetry entirely in the domain of dream-stuff. If, they say, poetry is to touch such stuff as you and I are made of, rather than such stuff as dreams are made of, why call it poetry?

But on poetry I have ever confessed myself incompetent; nothing guides me but an ear for music; and that, they tell me, is not enough. I have always, at any rate, admitted that Ambrose Bierce was as masterful a critic of poetry as he was of life and literature in general. And on poetry he, in other directions so reckless in his prejudices, kept sternly to the most Parnassian principles, the severest laws of prosody, of form, and fancifulness.

I find, since I am launched upon my consideration of Bierce as a journalist, that I am on the horns of a most discommoding dilemma. If I take it that most readers know little of the wonderful prose which Bierce expended so freely as a journalistic critic of men and things, I shall have to quote specimens; and if I do that, you will see at once that it would be far better to read Ambrose

Bierce about everything and anything than this stuff of my own. Well—even if my book does no more than that, it will have done something. For in satiric prose there has been no such writer as Ambrose Bierce in our time, on either side of the Atlantic.

Here is how Bierce once voiced that attitude of lashing always the sinner, not the sin, which brought him so many enemies: It is the same attitude which, by good fortune, I, in my lesser way, have been able to maintain, so that, to-day, lacking riches, I still have my self-respect. In reply to one who had accused him of being too much the misanthrope to be a fair critic, he said this:

Does it really seem to you that contempt for the bad is incompatible with respect for the good?—that hatred of rogues and fools does not imply love of bright and honest folk? Can you really not understand that what is unworthy in life or letters can be known only by comparison with what is worthy? He who bitterly hates the wrong is he who intensely loves the right; indifference to one is indifference to the other. Those who like everything love nothing; a heart of indiscriminate hospitality becomes a boozing ken of tramps and thieves. Where the sentimentalist's love leaves off the cynic's may begin.

It would not be necessary, I think, to quote one other single line to prove, to any discriminating person, the sort of critic Bierce was, the sort of stuff he worked in. For years, upon the Pacific Coast, he was the terror of fools and rogues, in print and out. His satire played about many pigmies; the pigmies are gone to the limbo they belonged to; his satire remains.

And here, I think, I had better set down some of the essentially pertinent features in Ambrose Bierce's life.

Born in Ohio, in the early 'Forties, Ambrose Bierce came from people who had their ancestral roots in New England. This is important, as against those objectors

who, when he pointed out some of our schoolbook inaccuracies anent the so-called War of 1812, accused him of being an Englishman. Even the date is important, in view of what the *Christian Union* wrote of him fifty years after. Which is too good a story to insert in this present bald biographic record; it must wait a little.

He fought with the Army of the Cumberland, on the staff of General Hazen, leaving the army with the rank of Brevet Major. The importance in this is that, when he came to write the volume of "Tales of Soldiers and Civilians" (now called by its European title "In the Midst of Life") he knew what he was writing about,—as Stephen Crane and others never did.

But for a mere toss-up, Major Bierce, after the war, might have continued the military career for which his knowledge of strategy, of the theory and practise of war, as well as his physical presence, so admirably fitted him. The United States would have gained a general, but lost a great artist. He went to California, and from there, early in the 'seventies, to London, where he turned journalist. Contributing to London *Fun*, in the days of the younger Hood, of George Augustus Sala, and of John Camden Hotten, the publisher, he there established himself as a satirist and humorist in the first rank of those using pure English. This detail is to be remembered, as explaining something of London's literary appreciation of the man. Also, you may see in what soil sprang the roots of his journalistic career.

Accomplished in journalism of the highest type, when he returned to California he soon beame a power. He superseded James T. Watkins on the San Francisco *News Letter*; he made that weekly, as he did the *Wasp*, memorable in the annals of personal journalism in America. With Frank Pixley he made the *Argonaut*. Gradually his personal fame and power were growing greater than any weekly paper could command; William R. Hearst took him over to the San Francisco *Ex-*



*aminer*, there to discourse of men and things in the department entitled "Prattle." There, for years, were printed, every Sunday, the boldest expressions of personal opinion, in the purest English, that the criticism of our time has any record of.

His books are not many, but all good. Small collections of the humor he had written in London over the signature of "Dod Grile" appeared as books there in the 'Seventies; among them was one called "Cobwebs from an Empty Skull." These, I think, are out of print. They deserve memory, however, inasmuch as it was one of them which, lying on an old bookstall, enabled Mr. Gladstone to give one of the few exhibitions of good taste in reading which he ever displayed. Through the expression of his delight in "Dod Grile," Mr. Gladstone revived in London the identity of Ambrose Bierce, and started that appreciation of Bierce's war-stories which rekindled our American regard of him. That one act—which is historic, and not merely anecdotic—should go a little toward wiping out the crimes Mr. Gladstone, as a taster of general literature, was constantly committing; his helping the "Robert Elsmere" snow-ball on its way certainly needed a deal of wiping out.

The book which will carry Bierce's name on to posterity was the collection of stories "In the Midst of Life." These tales had been printed first in newspapers. The newspapers, you see, have always been large in the story of this great man of letters. They printed these, the finest gems of story-telling in English; they had share in enabling his satiric criticisms to reach the public; and they had as great a share in preventing his literary genius being properly acknowledged in his own land and time. The famous volume referred to was first published privately in San Francisco by a merchant named E. L. G. Steele. His name deserves memory in any proper record of American literature. A second collection of Bierce's

stories of war and horror was printed as a book under the title "Can Such Things Be?" From G. A. Danziger's crude translation he made in "The Monk and the Hangman's Daughter" a fine English version of Richard Voss's German novel.

In his satiric prose these books are specimens: "Fantastic Fables" and "The Cynic's Word Book." In verse—a medium wherein he never pretended to work as other than a satirist on ephemeral men and matters; yet in which he accomplished much that was true poetry—we have his "Black Beetles in Amber" and "Shapes of Clay." The best of his satire long lay buried in newspaper files.

Before I come to that which already has assured him fame, his volume of short stories, let me, by further extracts from the satiric prose which for years he expended through the impermanent medium of a newspaper, show what sort of critic he was. That will explain, too, something of his career. You will see how, in our land allegedly of liberty and free speech, the entire American press could conspire to hamper the power and repute of a great critic who castigated always the fool rather than the folly, the knave rather than his knavishness. Wheresoever a malefactor engaged Bierce's attention—whether the crime was again decent politics, against good citizenship, or against the English language—there resulted criticism that had intrinsic merit far beyond its text. Into that criticism went the vigorous opinion of a strong individuality, and the English of a great man of letters. If he dismayed the fools, he also helped the worthy. Many a reputation that we now consider established—as the fleeting reputations of our current letters go—owed its origin to Bierce. That detail should be remembered, since his enemies worked so hard so many years to make him out a deadly pessimist, a dealer in hateful personalities. Whereas no person can reasonably read any

of his satire without finding therein, behind the apparent expression of strong prejudice, just such cold, clear reasoning, such impeccable logic, as in his fiction had given his pages their wonderful touches of inevitable, relentless tragedy.

You have only to glance in the most careless way at the satire, in prose and verse, which Ambrose Bierce for so many years flung forth so recklessly, to see why, in an age of compromise, he was branded "Dangerous" by those who think they command our literature. Where all else was compromise, and time-serving, he spoke his mind,—a mind wherein were great ideals, of art and of humanity. His critical creed was most completely expressed, I think, in some lines he once addressed "To a Censor." Him he accused thus:

Against abstractions evermore you charge  
 You hack no helmet and you need no targe.  
 That wickedness is wrong and sin a vice,  
 That wrong's not right and foulness never nice,  
 Fearless affirm. All consequences dare;  
 Smite the offense and the offender spare;

Good friend, if any judge deserve your blame  
 Have you no courage, or has he no name?  
 Upon his method will you wreak your wrath,  
 Himself all unmolested in his path?

We know that judges are corrupt. We know  
 That crimes are lively and that laws are slow.  
 We know that lawyers lie and doctors slay;  
 That priests and preachers are but birds of pray;  
 That merchants cheat and journalists for gold  
 Flatter the vicious while at vice they scold.

Do you need other evidence of his calibre and his craft?  
 Do you wonder, that in this country of ours, with its  
 hypocrisies, and its pandering to the popular on one hand

and the plutocrats on the other, such a writer was a thorn in the majority's flesh?

I have already referred to Bierce's standards for poetry. Those standards were often offended, and as often Bierce let loose the lightning of his wisdom and his wit. Especially was his impatience stirred by those who went about the country expounding the nature of poetry, without being themselves, by his criterion, poets. One of these was James Whitcomb Riley. There resulted a philippic against the "Hoosier" versifier which bred for Mr. Bierce one of his largest arrays of enemies. "Poetry," wrote Bierce, "is not incompatible with lowly themes; it may concern itself with the lives and sentiments, the deeds and emotions, of common people. Like the artist, the poet suffuses with a light that is not of earth whatever he touches. But the light is his light; it does not inhere in the subject. (To speak understandingly of poetry one must speak in metaphor, as the poet speaks; it is a thing to be felt, not defined.) Of this light Mr. Riley has not a gleam." He continued, thus:

In the dirt of his "dialect" there is no grain of gold. His pathos is bathos, his sentiment sediment, his "homely philosophy" brute platitudes—beasts of the field of thought. . . . His humor does not amuse. His characters are stupid and forbidding to the last supportable degree; he has just enough of creative power to find them ignoble and leave them offensive. His diction is without felicity, his vocabulary is not English. . . .

Do you wonder that this man made enemies?

Well—if enemies will bring us such literature as Ambrose Bierce has given us, we should all pray to God for more of them!

To one who, admitting him a consummate master of the language, had accused him of stamping on the face of his literary inferiors, he replied:

Is it unknown to you that this California of ours is one of the world's moral dark corners—that it is a happy hunting ground of rogues and dunces and such small deer, and that they are everywhere and always obstreperous, conspicuous, unscrupulous, dominant. Does it surprise and pain you that I find every year several scores of such, whom I deem deserving of the treatment that you describe in so lively metaphor? Can you not understand that the satisfaction I find in making enemies is a harmless satisfaction? And what excellent enemies they are! They never tire, they never sleep; never for a moment anywhere do they forget. No scheme of revenge is too base for them, no lie too monstrous to set going and keep going. And how sedulously they cloak the scars upon their backs, which would betray their motive!—how soberly they disclaim animosity, even affirm goodwill and admiration!

Yes, we may love him for his enemies; we may even love his enemies for that they stirred him to such imperishable satire. They may have hindered his immediate reputation; yet every stone they set in his path only helped build the temple of his future.

When, fifteen years ago, a maladroit scribbler syndicated a fantastic account of Bierce's career throughout America, mentioning him as "personally one of the gentlest of men," who had doubtless been "embittered by his failures," the subject of his remarks said merely this:

Without inquiring in what my failures have consisted, nor by what inspiration my biographer knows what it is that I am trying to accomplish in this little life, I will let that stand without comment; and carrying in my soul this touching picture of a heart-broken cynic, glittering with tears in the consciousness that nobody but God loves him, yet smiling through his hair as he feels upon his chin the splash of other tears than his, I back away from that sacred scene, and bidding myself a silent farewell, fall first upon my knees, and then upon my fools.

It was little wonder that when this man appeared for



consideration as a great literary artist, rather than as a militant journalist, the enmities he had stirred up, in critical circles, among newspaper men, and privately, should have done their best to fight him. Where there was not open animosity, there was naïve ignorance. Of this latter the *Christian Union*, of April 30, 1892, gave the prime example. It said of his "Soldiers and Civilians," which they compared, for exactness and accuracy, to Meissonier or Detaille—metaphor well meant but badly mixed!—

There is always a sensation of individual pleasure in discovering a "new man" in fiction-writing. Here, if we mistake not, is one. Ambrose Bierce is certainly a name unknown to fame. . . .

There, kindly as was the intent, was the bitter truth. The man, fifty years of age, who for at least twenty years had been the greatest artist in English on our continent, was "unknown to fame." Yes; so far, his enemies had been successful. But it is only contemporary reputation they can spoil; not fame.

The word "fame," indeed, is one never properly to be spoken of men still living; it is one of the perquisites of posterity.

At about the same time that the *Christian Union* was recording how ignorant the Atlantic Coast was of America's one great literary genius, the London *Chronicle* was reviewing his book of stories to the extent of columns. Years afterward, when an awkward squadsman wrote a book called "The Red Badge of Courage," American newspapers again exposed their ignorance or their malice; they praised that book out of all proportion to the debt it owed the Bierce book, which, in artistry, towered so far above it. Indeed, if one wished to indict American newspapers on the score of their attitude toward literature, one need go no farther than the case of Ambrose Bierce.

An equally illuminating chapter would be the one recounting faithfully Bierce's experiences with publishers.

What those experiences were you may gather, firstly, from the fact that the book which makes him famous was refused by every publisher of importance, and, nextly, from this general summing-up of their commercial morality:

What (wrote Ambrose Bierce, in "Prattle," one fine May day of 1892) is a publisher? One of the most famous definitions affirms him to be a person who drinks champagne out of the skulls of authors. Naturally that is an author's definition. The world has accepted it for its wit, with a mental reservation taking account of its probable untruth. Publishers having control of types and printing presses, and being thriftily addicted to the maintenance of magazines and other periodicals to affirm their virtues and acclaim their wares, have pushed themselves into public repute as a kind of beings indubitably superior to such sordid considerations as control the acts of merely human tradesmen—children of light, whose motives come of inspiration from Heaven, or are the natural outgrowth of a native nobility of soul fertilized by a generous desire to elevate the literary art. If authors have commonly indulged themselves in a different view of the matter after some little experience, they have not always taken the trouble to avow it, or, avowing it, to back up the avowal with facts in justification. To eminent authors—whose words would have most weight—the publishers have commonly made ample atonement for their early sins against them; and authors obscure, besides not having access to the world's ears and being prevented by publishers from reaching such ears as might be open to their objurgations, are popularly thought a pretty testy lot anyhow. So it occurs that of all who know publishers best, themselves are the only persons bearing public witness of their works and ways. And, God bless them; how they lie!

Let it be understood that I write of book publishers only, and of them in a general way; of the genus, not of the few noble freaks due to what the evolutionists call accidental vari-

ations. I fancy, too, that I write with some knowledge of the subject, both old and new, but the reader must fit me out with such an equipment of motives as may best meet his instinctive sense of the probabilities: I am hardly likely to state any facts giving him good ground for assumptions of personal prejudice. With this confession to guard and guide him he must be a very erratic reader indeed—a constitutional and irreclaimable estray—if he permit me to mislead him.

What, then, is a publisher? He is a person who buys of a small class of fools something which he sells to a large class of other fools. It is perhaps not surprising that he grows rich while the persons of whom he buys remain poor. The persons to whom he sells are not materially affected in fortune, for they buy but a little each; they are fools only in the sense of preferring worthless goods. Commonly he is a man of meagre education, having but little knowledge of what he buys and absolutely no more care for the interests of those producing it than a grain dealer for the interests of the farmer. Not so much; for the grain dealer knows that the bankrupt farmer may intermit production for a season while undergoing transformation to a tenant of his mortgagee, whereas the poorer an author becomes the more certainly and diligently he will make manuscript. In short, the transactions between author and publisher are on a purely commercial basis—that is to say, the one who has the whiphand of the situation “cinches” the other all he knows how. It would hardly be necessary to say this but for a vague notion in the public mind that the goods changing hands are of a character to refine and ennoble somewhat the relations between sellers and buyers, and if the latter had not from immemorable time promoted that erroneous view. Production of literature that is good for anything but to sell does somewhat refine and ennoble the producer doubtless, or, rather, perhaps, persons of refinement and nobility are somewhat more likely to produce it, but I do not think its purchase and publication is regarded by the angels as a means of grace for subduing the soul of the publisher to godliness and purging it of thoughts of theft.

Let us see what an author may reasonably hope to get by concession of these gracious gentlemen if he prefer to follow the appointed order of things by publishing first and becoming “famous” afterward. (When comfortably famous, his name

on the lips of every blackguard in the land, he may reverse the situation and bring publishers to *his* terms.) The "regular" rate to unknown, obscure or only fairly popular authors is ten per cent. of the retail price of each book sold. Let us now inquire in what relation to the project of publication this places the two parties to the transaction. Journalism being the profession that is least unlike that of literature may fitly be chosen to supply the "standard of wages" for use here. Newspaper writers make from one thousand to ten thousand dollars a year; two thousand will serve our purpose well enough as the sum that a writer's time is worth. The most impetuous and prolific novelists with whom Heaven has had the goodness to bless us seldom bring forth more than one whelp at a time—produce more than one book a year is what I meant to say.

The author of the book-to-be, then, may be considered to have risked two thousand dollars on it—to have put that sum into the enterprise. The publisher, venturing to print a small edition, puts in one-half that amount. Let us be liberal and, counting in expenses of distribution, advertising, etc., say an amount just equal. But in dividing the proceeds the publisher takes out of every dollar ninety cents and hands over ten cents to the author. And then the good man executes upon the horn of him a lively fanfaronade in celebration of his generosity in consenting to exist.

It is readily admitted that the cost of the manuscript to the author in time and labor is a matter with which the publisher has nothing to do, and which cannot with advantage be considered. In the matter as to others our old friend the law of supply and demand puts in a claim to consideration. But inasmuch as his reign is not altogether despotic, as is shown in the arbitrary adoption of ten per cent. as the author's rightful share, it seems not entirely unreasonable to hope that some day an honest and intrepid publisher may defy the law of supply and demand, break through the iron traditions of the trade, and commending his soul to God give as much as eleven.

I have always wondered why no publisher was able to refute that argument, which for logic, reasonableness and

accuracy, has never been surpassed. The fact remains that, to this day, I have never heard the case for the defense put so that it would convince.

On another occasion Bierce commented upon a statement, heedlessly made by a prominent publisher, that it was advisable for an author to have some calling other than literature. He pointed out that it had never been necessary for a publisher to have another trade than publishing.

While the general argument, as it stands above, is perfect, and ranks with what Pope and Byron have said of cognate subjects, Bierce often returned to these muttons. In one place he wrote:

Of the forty publishers connected by narrative with Ali Baba it is hardly probable that all were equal in enterprise and boldness; most likely some fine, rare soul, some "born leader of men," towered above his fellows in these particulars as a sandhill crane overlooks an even surface of ducks. And if in our day and generation he has any descendants, "heirs to his virtues, men of equal mind," I have the honor to flatter myself that I discovered them. . . . The reader may chance to remember a story . . . entitled "The Monk and the Hangman's Daughter." . . . My collaborator . . . recently offered it for publication to the . . . above mentioned descendants of Ali Baba's illustrious contemporary. After due consideration and a correspondence spreading over several weeks they submitted their proposal and doubtless employed a brass band to celebrate the event. They proposed to print the book and put it on the market, recouping themselves out of the first sales. Having made themselves whole the rest would be profit. They were willing to let the authors in on that—the said authors getting one-tenth of it! It goes without saying that the accounts were to be kept by the publishers. They would apparently keep anything.

Lest the matter wear quite too tragic a face—no more



so, however, than it deserves!—let me extract, by way of conclusion, one anecdote from the vast store in Bierce's buried "Prattle":

John Camden Hotten, the publisher (he wrote), who had given me a check, died of a pork pie in order to beat me out of the money. Knowing nothing of this, I strolled out to his house at Highgate the next morning, and on being told was inexpressibly shocked, for my check was worthless. There was a hope, however: the bank might not have heard; so, having pinched the body and ascertained that it was indubitably lifeless, I called a hansom cab and drove furiously bankward. Unfortunately my gondolier steered me past the Ludgate station, in the bar whereof our Fleet Street gang of writers had a private table; so I disembarked for a mug of bitter. Unhappily, too, Sala, Tom Hood the younger and others of the scapegrace gang were in their accustomed places. I sat at board, and in the pride of my "scoop" related the sad event. The deceased had not in life enjoyed our favor, and, I blush to say, we all fell to making questionable epitaphs on him. Of the dozens that we turned off I am able (for my sins) to recall but one. That was by Sala, and, like all the others, was writ in rhyme. It ran thus:

" Hotten,  
Rotten,  
Forgotten."

I should like to explain that the author of this glowing composition was not a good prophet. The late John Camden Hotten cannot wholly perish out of memory so long as his virtues survive him in his successors.

Such, then, were some of the experiences and conclusions in one lifetime of intercourse with publishers. Not an ordinary lifetime, but that of the only man of letters America harbored in our time.

What, then, may have been the experiences of lesser men in that arena which the newspapers conspire to pro-

claim as full of honors and riches—to be had almost for the asking?

I shudder in contemplating this matter. Only the other day, in the summer of 1908, the metropolitan newspapers reported the case of a woman who, essaying literature, had been swindled out of her savings by no less than four successive firms of so-called publishers. But that was doubtless a case as exceptional—she being evidently of the type of authors better left unprinted!—as are those cases of the fortunes acquired by the “best selling” novelists.

The experience of Walter B. Harte was typical of the average obscure author's. His book of essays, as fine specimens of really fine art in writing as anything produced within living memory, never—so he once confessed to me—brought him in one cent. The Arena Company of Boston, which published it, cannot be said to have done anything else but print it; “published” is too large a word. The tragic remnant of the edition lay in Harte's attic for years before his death.

To go into exact particulars, let me cite the experience of one other obscure writer.

Some nine books are to his credit. For these, however, since in two cases he had new editions, he had eleven publishing firms.

In only two cases did he make enough to pay, at the lowest day-wages, for his time or his typewriting. In those two cases the books were sold outright, for cash.

Contrast those two cases, with those in which royalty contracts figured, and you will perceive an illuminating moral. Only one of the contracting publishers ever made either payments or statements of account; it is perhaps needless to say that he failed in business.

Out of the sum of all the publishers encountered, perhaps three were, in their intentions, at least, honest gentlemen.

If the matter in these books had not already brought their author a tiny income through serial publication, the time spent in their production would have been sheer waste. What the publishers made, it has never been possible to discover; their accounts are too well "kept."

Finally, let it be noted that this same author had two plays produced. Out of those he made more than from all his nine books.

Harsh enough are the things that have been said of those who rule the American theatre. What, then, shall be said of the rulers of our literature?

If—by the way—you care for that obscure author's name, I could send it to you.

The greatest journalist, and the greatest tale-teller in America, Ambrose Bierce, was also the only man who might have written that which our language has never had, a grammar.

I do not forget Richard Grant White and the others. But I repeat that, if ever a publisher, in our time or another, issues the Complete Works of Ambrose Bierce,\* those volumes will contain more than enough evidence in support of my contention. I even incline to the belief that if you cannot find such evidence in the brief extracts I have here made, you are so dull that I shall be sorry to have taken your money.

Whether as satirist, as grammarian—as an artist, in short, using the English language—Ambrose Bierce will reach posterity or not may be discussed; but that his short stories have assured him fame, is as certain as that Flaubert and Baudelaire are famous.

Mention of Baudelaire brings, of course, this thought:

\* Since this was written, publication of the "Collected Works of Ambrose Bierce" has begun in a Limited Edition.

Just as he achieved from the super-American art of Edgar Allan Poe some great artistry of his own; just as Lafcadio Hearn turned Gautier's exquisite "Avatar" into equally exquisite English; so might a clever Frenchman, or German, or Italian, lay hold on fame's fringes by adequately translating the stories of Bierce. For he is of that great company of artists who, whatever country they may have belonged to by birth or residence, belonged in the last analysis to no country whatever. Walter Frewen Lord said of Poe that "his stories were written by an American citizen; but they might have been written by anybody." That could not justly be said of Bierce. Though his art, as art, was exotic to the rest of American art; yet it could not have been written by anybody; nobody who had not fought through the American Civil War could have written "Tales of Soldiers and Civilians."

As a critic Bierce wrote of short-story art as one having authority; he ever reckoned it superior to the novel. That argument he clinched by his own short stories. Having chosen the form which he had so oft declared the superior in fiction, he proceeded to produce, in that form, the finest gems which, in our time, our language knew. Yet, in 1908, Hamilton W. Mabie—one of the typical deans having in charge our literary parochialisms—after admitting that the short-story is probably the oldest literary form, and one of the most vital, gave in what purported to be a collection of "typical American and English Tales" no place to Bierce, beside Poe and Hawthorne, but to James Lane Allen, William Austin and Owen Wister!!!

I have said, time and again, that where a novel lacked style, and taste, where it was mere reporting, it was worthless, and that such worthlessness was our average. Bierce went further. In his argument for that form of art which he himself has used to such splendid ends, he wrote:

Not only is the novel . . . a faulty form of art, but because of its faultiness it has no permanent place in literature. In England it flourished less than a century and a half, beginning with Richardson and ending with Thackeray, since whose death no novels, probably, have been written that are worth attention; though as to this one cannot positively say, for of those written only a few have been read by competent authority. The French novel, too, and the German are as dead. . . . In Russian literature the novel still has something of vitality, for it is still young, new, "novel." That in all these literatures novels are still produced in suspicious abundance and read with fatal acclaim is nothing to the purpose; I am speaking of the novel as a work of art, whereas the novel of to-day has no art broader and better than that of its individual sentences—the art of style.

He continues:

Among the other reasons why the novel is both inartistic and impermanent is this—it is mere reporting. True, the reporter creates his events and characters, but that itself is a fatal objection, placing it on a plane distinctly inferior to that of history. Attention is not long engaged by what could but did not occur to individuals; and it is a canon of the trade that nothing is to go into the novel that might not have occurred. Probability—which is but another name for the commonplace—is its keynote. When that is transgressed, as in the great fiction of Scott and Hugo, the work is romance, another and superior thing, addressed to higher faculties with a more imperious insistence. The singular inability to distinguish between the novel and the romance is one of criticism's capital ineptitudes. It is like that of a naturalist who should make a single species of the squirrels and the larks. Equally with the novel, the short story may drag at each remove the lengthening chain of probability, but there are fewer removes. The short story does not, at least, cloy attention, confuse with overlaid impressions and efface its own effect.

Great work has been done in novels. That is only to say that great writers have written them. But great writers may err in their choice of literary media, or it may occur that



an author of genius is more concerned for gain than excellence—for the nimble popularity that comes of following a literary fashion than for the sacred credentials of renown. The acclamation of the multitude may be sweet in his ear, the clink of coins grateful to his purse. To their gift of genius the gods add no security against its misdirection. I wish they did. I wish they would enjoin its diffusion in the novel, as for so many centuries they did by forbidding the novel to be. And what might we not have had from Virgil, Dante, Tasso, Camoens and Milton if they had not found the epic poem ready to their misguided hands? May there be in Elysium no bed of asphodel and moly for its hardy inventor, whether he was Homer or "another man of the same name."

Which is surely very closely reasoned. The closing reference to the epic poem I had, I must admit, forgotten, until I found it again in my files just now; I had not thought Bierce had ever come so close to my own notion that poetry is lyric or it is nothing. But mine, as I have said before, are but the notions of a fanciful person; Bierce's are the deductions of cold logic.

Just as the newspapers, who had given him his main avenues into print, conspired to retard the renown of Ambrose Bierce, so the Hamilton Mabies of our time long pretended ignorance of his being the only man of genius in America writing short stories.

But his thin little volume, "In the Midst of Life"—let me call it, from now on, by the title which, first used for the European edition, has now superseded the "Tales of Soldiers and Civilians" on this side of the water also—will be alive when the Hamilton Mabies are "of the missing."

In this book of his, on which his fame must largely depend, there were but nineteen stories.

The grimmest of subjects combined with psychologic

analysis of the clearest. The method of realism, a style as pure as crystal, went with imaginative vision of the most searching, and the most radiant. Death, in warfare, and in the horrid guise of the supernatural, was painted over and over. Man's terrors in the face of such death gave the artist the cue for his wonderful physical and psychologic microscopics. You could not pin this work down as realism, or as romance; it was the great human drama—the conflict between life and death—fused through genius. Not Zola in the endless pages of his "Debacle" had ever painted War more faithfully than any of the war stories in this book; not De Maupassant had invented out of war's terrible truths more dramatically imagined plots. The very color and note of war itself are in those pages. There painted an artist who had seen the Thing Itself, and being a genius, had made of it art still greater. I do not hesitate to say that "In the Midst of Life" may live when all other memories of the American Civil War are gone.

Death was the closing note of every one of the ten stories of war in this book. The brilliant, spectacular death that came to such senseless bravery as Tennyson hymned for the music-hall intelligence in his "Charge of the Light Brigade"; the vision-starting, slow, soul-drugging death by hanging; the multiplied, unspeakable death that fills the fields where battles passed; the death that comes from sheer terror—death actual and imagined—every sort of death was in these pages, so painted as to make Pierre Loti's "Book of Pity and of Death" seem but feeble fumbling.

Which brings the thought: Whatever else Bierce's detractors allowed him, they never admitted that he was human in his art. If you want to spoil your sleep o' nights, they shrugged, read him if you like; but the man is absolutely without heart. Against that I always remember the closing of his story of that amazing, foolish charge undertaken by "A Son of the Gods":

The skirmishers return, gathering up their dead.

Ah, those many, many needless dead! That great soul whose beautiful body is lying over yonder, so conspicuous against the sere hill-side—could it not have been spared the bitter consciousness of a vain devotion? Would one exception have marred too much the pitiless perfection of the divine, eternal plan?

His own words, it is true, may patly be used for his own tale-telling genius: it had an almost pitiless perfection. The very face of war was painted as no other, save only Verestchagin, had painted it; the human soul in agony was exposed relentlessly; the sense of drama was paramount; for any pity that might mar the picture or the drama there was no more room than in Nature herself. No dramatist ever used the values of surprise more effectively than Bierce. Rarely, until the very last sentence, does he give you the illuminating heart of the mysteries he has made so dreadful and so fascinating. That applies to his stories of more or less supernatural horror, as well as to his war stories.

"Soldiers" and "Civilians" still head the two sections in "In the Midst of Life," and if you say "war stories" and "ghost stories" you come fairly near the truth. In the war stories he was not only a pioneer, but he blazed a path where few may follow; the fact that Stephen Crane, attempting that path, reached a sort of passing notoriety, has bearing only on the history of our criticism, not of literature. In his ghost stories we may mention in the same breath only De Maupassant. Much as the art of Bierce has been compared to that of Edgar Allan Poe, it is not properly comparable to that at all—save as being great art in great English—as his treatment of the ghost-story will prove. (In war-stories, as I have said, he had neither forerunner nor peer.) Both Poe and Theodor Hoffmann were genuine romantics; but they cared little for form. Poe was the more awe-inspiring of the two; Hoffmann had what Poe lacked: humor.

In psychology, and in humor, Bierce approaches Hoffmann; but in brevity, in definite sense of form, De Maupassant is his only rival. Nearly all the other great artists who worked this vein, used subjective psychology; Bierce's was ever severely objective. You have only to read that wonderful story "The Suitable Surroundings" to see that. Hoffmann's stories were all mere variations on his own image and his moods; Poe's expressed this or that bitterness of soul or mind; but in Bierce's stories you get no glimpse of a personality. This art, and this prose, was absolutely impersonal; it was relentless as Fate, as perfect and as purposeless as the diamond.

No greater indictment of the publishing fraternity in America is possible than is in the line Ambrose Bierce wrote, in 1891, on the fly-leaf of this book: "Denied existence by the chief publishing houses of the country, this book owes itself to Mr. E. L. G. Steele, merchant, of San Francisco."

Had there been in it nothing else than the ten war-stories it had deserved fame. The ghastly description of the battlefield after "Chickamauga" may survive memory of the battle itself. Nothing in the horrible possibilities of civil war is more dramatic than "The Affair at Coulter's Notch," wherein an officer of artillery has to train his guns upon a house which shelters his own wife and child.

Briefly, if but one volume written in America in our time is to survive for the perusal of future centuries, that volume is "In the Midst of Life."

If of Bierce's realism and romance, the range of his imagination and the accuracy of his eye, the depth of his philosophy and the sureness of his style, you can get little notion unless you actually read his stories; so can I not hope adequately to acquaint you with all that he has done for satire, for poetry, and for the very lan-

guage. I have tried to show something of his theory of the short-story, as well as his triumphs therein. I have quoted fragments of his satiric style; yet I can hardly have done more than whet the appetite of the *gourmet*. I have shown what were the publishing experiences of this one genius in American letters. Several matters still remain: his poetry and his influence on poetry are among them.

As an influence on American poetry Bierce emerged into general notice on more than one occasion. It was he who from the first had given Edwin Markham the encouragement that made him keep courage to remain a poet. When publication of "The Man with the Hoe" swept this continent like a prairie fire, Bierce withdrew his approbation; the poem made for immediate notoriety, but eventually it made for Markham's decline. From being a poet, he became a lecturer. He lectured, in print and out, about poetry and about socialism; but he became more demagogue than artist. That same spirit in him which had caused him to voice the people's wrongs, and bade him pray his fellow poets to send forth, in song, "a tempest flinging fire upon the wrong," surged in him so strongly that the purpose of his art grew greater than the art itself. He, who had sung of Truth that it is enough

"If we can be a bugle at her lips,  
To scatter her contagion on mankind"

became in later years so militant with purpose, so unsatisfied with poetry for merely poetry's sake, that it was little wonder that Bierce, with his passionately severe formula for poets, would have no more of him.

More recently Bierce threw down the gauntlet to contemporary opinion by affirming that a young poet, George Sterling, had in a poem called "Wine of



Wizardry" proven himself "incomparably the greatest poet that we have on this side of the Atlantic." Into the controversy that followed I do not mean to enter here; I cannot sufficiently insist that poetry must be beyond my proper appreciation, since I am content, in the matter of rhymed stuff, if it goes musically. I never, for instance, saw anything in Sterling's work which came up to these stanzas, surely as vigorous as any in Kipling's "Recessional" and surely, also, more loftily put:

God of my country and my race!  
 So greater than the gods of old—  
 So fairer than the prophets told  
 Who dimly saw and feared thy face,—

To whom the unceasing suns belong,  
 And cause is one with consequence,—  
 To whose divine, inclusive sense  
 The moan is blended with the song,—

Whose laws, imperfect and unjust,  
 Thy just and perfect purpose serve;  
 The needle, howsoever it swerve,  
 Still warranting the sailor's trust,—

God, lift thy hand and make us free  
 To crown the work thou hast designed,  
 O, strike away the chains that bind  
 Our souls to one idolatry!

Give thou or more or less, as we  
 Shall serve the right or serve the wrong.  
 Confirm our freedom but so long  
 As we are worthy to be free.

But when (O, distant be the time!)  
 Majorities in passion draw  
 Insurgent swords to murder Law,  
 And all the land is red with crime;

Or—nearer menace!—when the band  
Of feeble spirits cringe and plead  
To the gigantic strength of Greed,  
And fawn upon his iron hand;—

Nay, when the steps to state are worn  
In hollows by the feet of thieves,  
And Mammon sits among the sheaves  
And chuckles while the reapers mourn;

Then stay thy miracle!—replace  
The broken throne, repair the chain,  
Restore the interrupted reign  
And veil again thy patient face.

Those lines are picked out as typical; yet, even so, they give but a faint notion of the whole poem, which is an "Invocation" written by Ambrose Bierce just twenty years ago for Independence Day. The poem is hidden away in the nearly 400 pages of the volume "Shapes of Clay," wherein, as in the other collected verses, "Black Beetles in Amber," the multitude of his enemies is pickled for posterity. You have only to open those volumes anywhere to marvel at his dexterity in rhymed satire. He never pretended to be a poet; he disclaimed ever having written any poetry. Yet, if his "Invocation" is not poetry, then is not the "Recessional" poetry either. I only ask the fair-minded to decide for themselves. My own dilemma is peculiar enough: I believe in Bierce's judgment of poetry, and he has said he is not a poet. If I must differ with him on anything, it would be about that.

My Case is nearly concluded. It culminates with Ambrose Bierce. The sort of rubbish that has constituted the average of that abundant production with which we were told to be satisfied, you have seen; and now you see the stone the builders of our literary temple so reluc-

tantly accepted: Ambrose Bierce. Between those gulfs of taste—the mediocrity we permitted and the one man of genius we long tried to deny—American literature is in a state more parlous than in that time when England asked who read an American book.

That is the Case.

The Blame lies with our lack of any criticism deserving the name. That lack includes the newspapers.

But before I come to the general arraignment of our uncritical conditions, let me emphasise again how they affected the career of Ambrose Bierce. Although newspapers first printed most of what he wrote, even to the most precious gems of his literature, it was the newspapers also, snarling back under the lashes of his satire, who did their best to hinder his renown. Allied with them was that pseudo-critical crew which, unfortunately for American letters, has so long been dominant on the Atlantic Coast. My friend, William Marion Reedy, that Missouri amalgam of Rochefort and Gambetta, exploded, not long ago, our “Myth of a Free Press.” The case of Ambrose Bierce—quite aside from the larger indictment I mean presently to bring—is quite enough to dissipate that dream still more thoroughly. What, more than anything, our so-called criticism was never able to imagine was that Bierce—or any other honest man—laid on so heavily with his satire with any other object than the satisfying of a personal grudge. Our national dishonesty, incapable of rightly interpreting a critical campaign for artistic principles, refused to believe that a man might love you as a brother, while cordially condemning your work; or might consider you a despicable rogue while admiring your art.

Knowing this, having experienced it many a time, I mean to be beforehand with those amateurs of obviousness who will try to wave away my appreciation of Ambrose Bierce, man of letters, with the suggestion that Ambrose Bierce, the man, is evidently one of my friends.

They are quite right: I have that honor. It has nothing whatever to do with the case, but it is quite true. Years after I began to proclaim publicly my admiration of the writer's art, I made the man's acquaintance. We have broken bread together, gone journeys together, lived under the same roof. All of which—though it had no bearing whatever on my opinion of his art—I have counted as a bright interlude in a somewhat monotonous chain of critical and personal experiences.

Very early in my critical work I found that to come into personal relations with authors was the most fatal of mistakes; they are quite as hopelessly as politicians and newspapers given to the belief that if my friend does a silly thing I must say it is a clever thing. So, what with the safety of it, and my not happening, in any event, to be a sociable animal, I kept as clear as possible of men who wrote. It prevented disaster and disenchantment. In a passive sense, of course, my course did not make for profit. In an age wherein the man who studies "office politics" more than the art of English succeeds in journalism and in supplying "best-sellers," the man who keeps himself remote, who merely writes of life and letters as he sees them, as honestly and as artistically as he can, is very likely to be left in the secluded society of himself. That risk, then, I ran cheerfully; if I kept but a small company of friends, the large phalanx of my enemies constantly assured me of my value in the world; and I kept, above all else, my conscience clean, and my critical judgment unaltered by friendships or by hates. I could name, I think, in two minutes, all the writers I have known in person; but—I thank my fortune Ambrose Bierce was one of them.

Withdrawal from the world of "office politics" relieved me, even as a critic of letters, from the need of adding others to the list of the unnecessary fools even the worst of us accumulates. The many mediocre writers whom I have been forced to read, I have never, praise be,

had to lay eyes on. But that I have known, as man, one great genius in American literature is something I shall ever be thankful for. To have known such a man of letters, more than atones for my never having moved much in what I suppose is called "literary society." Nothing more astonishes the provincial than your admission that you do not know So-and-so, the novelist who makes ten thousand a year; you at once fill him with suspicion that as a critic you must be a fraud. He has read in the papers that So-and-so has a house-party at his new palace-by-the-sea, built from the proceeds of his newest novel; and he supposes, of course, that you were among those present. Well, though I have never known the persons who have amassed riches and renown by selling what people most wanted, I shall sleep just as well o' nights. But with Ambrose Bierce I have discussed men and things; we have fought as often as we have agreed;—notably on the art of painting I deprecate his views; and as to music, I am convinced that he has no ear!—I have walked with him, step by step, over those battlefields of Chickamauga and Lookout Mountain which he fought on and wrote of; and, in fine, if any ever ask me, now or hereafter:

"Have you known a Man of Letters?"

I can say:

"Yes: Ambrose Bierce."

Admitted, then, that I have been his friend.

What of it?

If he did work I thought unworthy, was our friendship to prevent my saying so? Because he became my friend, was I to call all his geese swans? The thing is too ridiculous. I would not mention it, did I not know the petty misdemeanors of our critical crew, the littleness of their minds, which cannot fancy in others the virtues they themselves lack. If I myself have done bad work, and my enemy in censuring me himself achieves a bit of



fine art, shall I not admire it? There is no logic in such reasoning; no logic and no honesty. If American criticism had, to-day, honesty, good taste, and logic, our literature would not be so like a crowded rabbit warren.

Let me conclude, then, my appreciation of Ambrose Bierce. In satire he was a giant; in short-stories a genius. Look but slightly into his "Cynic's Word Book" and you will find the grammarian, and the artist in English. I began my review of him with mention of his concern for our language; I can close it by reiterating that no man in our time did more for English than Ambrose Bierce.

Equally, none did greater harm to English literature than our critics and our newspapers.



## PART THREE

### CRITICISM



## CHAPTER ONE

So paramount, in our time, has been the influence of the newspapers in forming the people's opinion, in both material and artistic affairs, that criticism in America can hardly be said to have existed outside of the daily press. With the passing of a healthy and honest weekly press, the entire absence of proper prejudice and personality, criticism, adequately deserving the name, has become so insignificant as to be typic of an amazing national condition: a huge democracy, believing in the myth of a free press, and dominated by that press just as tyrannously as by any of the other so-called trusts.

For our present taste in letters, then, the American newspaper is primarily to be held responsible.

William Archer, pointing out, not long ago, how balefully the novel was the "dominant art-form" of our time, declared that "the novelists whose works a man of intelligence feels bound to read may easily be counted on the five fingers." On our side of the water, things were even worse. With either literature or intelligence our flood of "best-selling books" had nothing to do; publishers seemed to publish only because their advertisements had started a sort of craving in the public—a disease, like dipsomania, or cocaine. Ours was a fictional debauch. What with the greed of publishers and authors, the ignorance of the public, and the venality of the newspapers, the American national intelligence was threatened vitally. That the novel is of all art-forms the cheapest, and permits the greatest fools to essay it, there can be no denying. What had been typical in novel-production I have tried to show; in the higher forms



of literary art, especially in criticism, we had hardly anything. Certainly not if the newspapers could help it.

The newspapers failed to correct the national tendency toward dishonesty. Themselves guilty of time-serving, of compromise, and of no morality at all save what might cater to the greatest possible number, they could not hope to have any effect of meliorism on a people who judged right and wrong only by the standard of success.

First, however, let me preamble a little, by declaring that I know well enough that honest men enter the newspaper profession. But I have no hesitation in declaring that it seldom lets them stay honest.

The workman becomes subdued, eventually, to what he works in. Let a youth of ever so fine a moral and mental code enter upon the profession of journalism, and I doubt if his moral fibre would survive three years. I do not mean, here, to invade the subject which William Marion Reedy took in his pamphlet on "The Myth of a Free Press"; but there are some individual experiences of my own which should be set down.

The newspaper man is no longer the pariah he was once considered. We do not need long memories to recall the time when the legend of the writing man's drunkenness had its basis in fact. One of the honestest crew of men I ever came in contact with were the newspaper men of Chicago in the years just before the Columbian Exposition; but when a certain cure for drunkenness began to prove occasionally efficacious nearly every newspaper in town sent half the staff down to be experimented on. One of these cures was situated in an Illinois village named Dwight, and in current jest the Press Club of Chicago was dubbed the Dwight Annex.

In any chronicle of literary conditions, going back as far as the end of the nineteenth century, that Press Club deserves mention, since, with the old Bohemian Club of

San Francisco, it harbored men who really wrote English, who were not butchers, bankers, and brokers. A membership of the latter worthies has enabled many a so-called press club in America to build itself snug quarters; but it never brought them near the kingdom of literature.

Working in the most happy-go-lucky conditions some of those writers, marooned, to all intents and purposes, on that barren coast of Middle-Western culture, were as genuine in their aspirations, and often as worthy in their achievements, as was ever any band of artists, whether of Barbizon or Concord. The Atlantic Coast, in its arrogance, would have none of them. Their own town was unconscious of their existence. Yet they went on, good newspaper men, and good writers, for the sake of "das Ding fuer sich," rather than the steak-and-ale at Billy Boyle's, or the game of poker, or the all-night carousals of the Whitechapel Club.

They loathed sham, and hated snobs. The age of great men owning newspapers was not yet gone by; Joseph Medill still lived. Elwyn Barron and "Teddy" McPhelim wrote criticism of the drama that should have lived longer than that drama itself. The æsthetic and literary aspirations of a well-meaning plutocrat, Hobart Taylor, were publicly lampooned by the Whitechapel Club, which nominated him for Mayor.

Eugene Field had his local Maecenas, and his Eastern publishers. "Chevalier" Fuller, one of America's few stylists, and Ernest McGaffey, one of its few poets, also had publishers elsewhere; Chicago neither published nor read. That in such an atmosphere so many good men went on with their business of honestly writing as best they could, is one of the most amazing things in all literary history. For, if the periods of Pfaff's in New York, and of the Bohemian Club in San Francisco, belong to any proper history of American literature, so does the period I write of.

Elsewhere I have mentioned Hamlin Garland, and John McGovern. The former represented the attitudes and the advertisements which our paramount conditions have usually demanded as hostages to success. The latter was of the humbug-hating, forthright type which, remaining perhaps, in the last analysis, Chicago obscurities, nevertheless were honest writers and honest Americans. Indeed, we could easily pursue the argument beyond mere literature; it has ever been the American of the interior who has been the only one deserving the name. We may deplore the mental indolence which has let him follow, in the arts, fallacious idols; but the guilt of that has ever been with the newspapers; he himself has never so debased the true coin of taste and honesty as have the pseudo-aristocrats and the aliens of the metropolis.

Of Stanley Waterloo's novel "A Man and a Woman" you may never have heard. Quality never had aught to do with results; it is only the noise of the advertisements that compels attention. I do not say it was a great book; but it was quite as good as any of the stories writ large in your favorite newspaper. As for the same writer's short story "The Dog and the Man," in grim satire and general technique, few of our writers have surpassed it.

About Opie Read, the work he did, the figure he cut, and the man he was, it were easy to write a book. He is renowned enough; in the West his reputation as novelist towers far beyond that of any touted "best seller"; but by the literary "powers that be" he has always been ignored. His short stories, about the "Arkansaw Traveler" and similar subjects, are gems of natural spontaneous writing; they belong with Mark Twain's "Jumping Frog" story, and other essentially American native products. The list of his novels, with "A Kentucky Colonel" at the head of them, is long—too long for fine art, but not too long to display a great natural, profuse

talent. The man was a born tale-teller; style he cared nothing for; his was the genius for improvisation which was Homer's and the other great improvisers.

Of another artist, Oscar Wilde, Walter Pater declared that his writing always had the quality of a good talker; the same was true of Opie Read; he wrote, as he talked, fluently, almost garrulously, with wonderful fertility, restless invention. From his sofa in the Press Club he could tell stories literally by the hour; they were better than anything he wrote, though that was entertaining enough. That such a man, pouring out stories, novels, and plays,—appearing as a public entertainer even from the public platform—should not have equaled the national renown of a Mark Twain or a Joaquin Miller, is one of the mysteries of Luck. Others, too, have had the vagrom temperament, yet have been recognised as great men. Chicago, and circumstances, conspired to give Opie Read, for all his opulently outpoured talents, little save what payed his poker debts.

It is, this case of Opie Read's, so far-reaching, that I find it hard to leave it. His novels were published mostly in paper, and sold on Western trains. In that form our Eastern publishers and public have never been able to conceive literature. Ten years or so ago, when some ambitious firms in Boston and Chicago tried to emulate the European device of printing beautiful books in artistically decorated paper, they failed dismally; the public could not be convinced that real books might appear in something else than the hard wooden boards of convention. Even to-day—when one would suppose millions of traveled Americans, who buy the Tauchnitz editions in Europe, to be convinced of real literature being possible outside of "cloth" bindings—an American book issued in paper runs risk of being ignored. I maintain, however, that in emulation of the named Leipzig model, a publisher could achieve fortune and renown, if he would spend the same money which now suborns newspaper crit-

icism through the advertisements, on educating our public to artistically paper-bound books; he would succeed where his forerunners, striking the iron too soon, failed.

Read could not be called a man of letters; but he was as genuine a humorist, a student of American character as thorough, as any man our time produced. He wrote too much; his work was often mere journalism—as that of Kipling, and G. W. Stevens, was journalism;—but he voiced the real America far more accurately than any baker's dozen of accomplished literary dandies writ large in the magazines.

There is always the proper mean in these matters. If I admire style, if I think it vitally lacking in our letters, that need not blind me to the belief that some great natural talents are great without style. It is not the Opie Reads who have plunged us into our abyss of mediocrity; it is the countless "climbers" who, having nothing to say, say it badly. Opie Read always had something to say, and he said it as forthrightly as any great natural force.

Of the stories Opie Read told, or of those told about him, some few have bearing on my case. "I was highly flattered the other day," he said to me once in the Press Club, "in an article on 'Literary Earnings.' It said I made \$10,000 a year easily." He paused, and then went on, apparently apropos of nothing, "I'm posted for my dues here."

A friend met Opie Read on the street. A new novel by the latter had already been announced, but he was wandering leisurely along, munching an apple, and trying to find a skyline somewhere beyond the hideous skyscrapers of Chicago. "Hallo, Opie," said the friend; "got to work yet?"

"You bet," said Opie, "I'm busy's a bee. Bought some ink day before yesterday; got a ream of paper yesterday; and a pen to-day. To-morrow——"



"Well," urged the friend, filling in the pause, "to-morrow?"

"To-morrow," concluded Read, "I'll buy a paper-weight."

Many reasons might be alleged for this man's failure to reach the national renown of his compeers. His fellow-townsmen, Peter Dunne and George Ade, both became more conspicuous figures; yet at least one of them was not worth the most careless page Opie Read ever wrote. Allowing for the element of sheer Luck—so vital an element in literary success, that Walter Blackburne Harte once named the Devil and Dame Chance as success's most vital factors!—and allowing also for the publishing and critical cabals of the East, there remains the matter of sheer honesty. Opie Read, with many of those other Western strangers to compromise, was too honest to play the game as to-day it has to be played. I never saw a more disgusted man than he when he was returned, once, from a month or so in New York, attending the birth of a play of his which Stuart Robson was producing.

For the game of letters, and of newspapers, as it is to-day, is no game for honest men. They may come into it honest, but they rarely stay so. Let me invent, upon this point, an imaginary dialogue:

## CHAPTER TWO

A HAPPY INFANT and a Jaded Hack found themselves doomed to dine together. The one was still as full of optimism as the Atlantic of water; the other had not been on speaking terms with optimism for more years than the Happy Infant had ever seen. Gastronomically both were in their tabledotage.

At the curry of chicken the Happy Infant held his glass of logwood-essence up to the light, as if to persuade his eyes of what his stomach denied, and then remarked in the tone of a man just fallen heir to a million of money:

"I am thinking of going in for literature."

The other grunted, "You always were a fool!"

"I thought I'd get your candid opinion. You know the game from A to Z. You know me. I believe I'm decently intelligent; I don't habitually mistreat the King's English. But I'd rather be a poor gentleman than a rich cad. Tell me—this game of writing for a living, what sort is it?"

The older man sighed. "Why come to me?" he asked. "There is plenty of other counsel. Robert Louis Stevenson——"

"I know," was the interruption, "I have read that. And Andrew Lang—and others. But I thought them a little too—fine. I want to get nearer the earth. So I ask you——"

"Thank you," said the Jaded Hack, smiling, "I accept your unconscious slight without bitterness. Tush—, you're perfectly right; I'm not among the Parnassians. I know that; better than you. But that's not nearly so bad as my being satisfied with it. You want my ex-

perience? Well——” He lit a cigar, and went on:

“You have youth, average education, and a few ideals. You have read some of the old masters, and even know something of the modern schools. You feel a stir of creation in you; you want to write books, but you realise that books, like canvas for the painter, are speculations at long range. Before you become artist, you might as well be apprentice. So you turn to newspaper work. To make your living by it, you think, will be easy enough; merely to write every day what will bring the morrow’s bread and butter can be no great matter. The chief thing needed is to know how to write; you think that, don’t you?”

The other nodded.

“Fatal error! You think, as long as you produce readable stuff, that nothing else matters? Wrong, all wrong! What you need is diplomacy and intrigue. It’s not a man’s work that counts, it’s the man himself. His ability to round a paragraph, turn a phrase, to scent news and make the most of it; none of these things count. You would be astonished if I told you the names of men high in metropolitan newspaper repute as capable editors, who have never written a sentence of good English in their lives. They came to promotion after promotion simply through personal politics, chicane, and all the arts of strategy selfishly applied. What energy, what brain, these men had, they applied not to writing the most trenchantly, or cultivating in themselves and others the finest taste, but to most successfully currying favor with employers, undermining the reputations and positions of superiors, plotting against possible rivals, and mounting, if need be, on the prostrate forms of even their best friends. In no other profession in the world do men stoop so low in intrigue and cunning to gain success which others attempt only by honest industry.

“What’s the use naming names? You won’t believe me, as it is. But I can assure you that if you come

into this arena with nothing but your pen and a clean conscience, you will need to be something like a genius to succeed against the weapons other men use. I'm perfectly willing to admit that I, for instance, am a howling failure, from the world's standpoint. And I thank my everlasting stars I've never toadied to a man I loathed, cringed to a lesser spirit, lied about my fellows or written a word I didn't honestly believe. I don't think many of the successful gentlemen can say as much. . . . One shrewd customer, I recall, once admitted to me that in arranging his days he always set aside two to three hours each day to the purpose of what he called 'seeing people.' He wished to keep himself always in sight; when a desk showed a vacant chair, he wanted to be near the door and able to step in; he confessed that his writing was not up to much, but that in being 'on the spot' you couldn't beat him.

"Let us suppose you consider newspaper work merely as a means to the end of literature. If you continue where you began, the newspaper will eventually so loosen and vitiate any style you may have that your English becomes journalese, and instead of a creator you become a machine. Let us suppose you turn into the narrower lane of literature. Your very apostasy will bring you enemies; the whole newspaper world, in so far as it remembers you, is against you. Your youth, remember, is a crime. To have opinions is a danger; to express them is to reap the whirlwind. Every age has the literary mentors it deserves; ours has had Boks and Harveys."

"There must be a golden mean?"

"A mean, yes; but not golden. There is a sort of borderland between literature and the newspaper. In that field logrolling is the chief industry. Literary reputations, to-day, are largely a matter of log-rolling. One day you will see an innocent paragraph stating that Mrs. Tomdick has written a novel sharply satirising society; to-morrow you note somewhere else that Mrs. Tomdick,

as well known in literature as in society, is to lecture at the High Tea Club on Modern Fiction; and presently a very flood of paragraphs announces that lady's taste in coiffure or Ibsen. In fact, by the time the good woman's yarn is really ready for the public, the public has been badgered into such a state of nervous irritation as to Mrs. Tomdick's activities, that it buys her trash in sheer despair. She has 'worked the press,' that modern oracle."

The Happy Infant was still smiling, but not so blithely.

"Did you begin—like this?" he asked.

"Of course not. I suppose I was the same sort of ass you are. I tried to think, otherwise, for years; I can't any more. I see things as they are. Machiavelli did no more—and to-day they use his name as if it meant roguery! No; compared to things as they are, the old scheme of having a patron cannot have hurt one's self-respect half so much. Wasn't it better to admit one Maecenas, than curry favor with a dozen men less than yourself?" He threw the butt of his cigar into the fireplace, as if therewith to dismiss the subject. "Don't mind me," he said, "you're over seven, and I see you've made up your mind, and only ask advice, like any woman, because you don't mean to take it."

"To listen to you," said the other, "purification of the press is as much needed as of politics, insurance, the police. . . . But even there, you know, a Theodore Roosevelt . . ."

"Oh—you want to help clean out the stables, do you? You and Hercules and Roosevelt? Well——" He did not finish the sentence. He took the Happy Infant's arm and walked him out into the clear night. Then he shook hands with him, and wiped away an airy tear. "To you, as one going to the wars, I say farewell, and Godspeed! Good luck to you for a brave idiot!"

And he walked away whistling "Danny Deever."



In that dialogue you gathered, I hope, some notion of what bitterness the newspaper life may start in those who attempt the fray armed only with intelligence and honesty. Yet, imagined as that conversation was, I assure you that not one line in it was as tragic a commentary as the actual career of the boldest and finest essayist our generation has seen in America, Walter Blackburn Harte. Nothing that I can write can equal for force and tragedy the closing pages in his essay "Some Masks and Faces," to be found in the volume "Meditations in Motley." "I have known hundreds of good, gentle, noble men who were bravos from high noon until two or three in the morning . . . after a few years in the masked service of journalism, even the most robust talent is crippled and deformed . . . a year or two as a journalistic cut-throat is enough to wholly corrupt and falsify their talent forever. . . ."

The tragedy of all this was in the fact that this great essayist was as surely killed by the American newspapers as if they had given him poison or poignard. Because of that essay from which I have just quoted, his book was ostracised by the American press; a book which had elicited praise from the *Academy* in London, and from such as Israel Zangwill. Harte died of that, and of the bitter bread he ate as a newspaper reporter.

This man, who had not only brains—a talent for both philosophical and analytical criticism,—but also, alas, a conscience, once wrote to me thus:

" . . . I am alive—but if I were more of an idealist, and more of a philosopher at that, I should affirm at the same time that I am dead. Morally, at any rate, I am dead and buried. I am earning my bread and butter as a newspaper brigand. This, in America, is about the worst possible pass any man with any refinement of character, and any moral feeling can come to. I have no sympathy at all with hustle and noise and the triumph of machinery or of democracy as we get it, with Tammany and the hoodlums on top in society,

politics and literature. I regard this democracy as a governing power, especially in all intellectual matters, as the worst possible catastrophe. The mob from the time of Socrates until to-day has been governed by its belly and its vanity and brutal passions, and politically and socially needs the constant crack of the whips about its ears, in order to keep accord with the scheme of Nature—grovelling on its belly!

“ . . . Every writer ought to put away all belief in the mob—it is the wanton that destroys us from a mere whim of total depravity. The mob! how many lives are ruined and have been ruined in America by the mob! What a pity George Washington was not made an absolute monarch with a conscience to teach the whelps good manners, and to give the arts the sanction of the only thing the mob respects, the sanction of the interest of the accidentally great ones of the earth.”

It is plain, of course, that what was the matter with this poor fellow, this brilliant failure, was that he refused to compromise. If, like our modern merchants in brains, he had, having discovered what it was the mob wanted, given it that, he might to-day, with the Booth Tarkingtons and the Harry Wilsons, be spending his summer in Versailles and touring Italy in a motor-car. He might, perhaps, have put his tongue in his cheek at thought of the mob; but he could have afforded to sneer at it, after he had pocketed its money. Too bad the man was cursed with a conscience! For, if you manage to do without a conscience, the trick of success is really amazingly easy. You discover the demand and you supply it. Nothing is simpler. I have always argued that if man could rid himself of shame as easily as does woman, he could beat her at her chosen game of writing shameless novels. Even so, to get on in literature and journalism, shed your scruples—and the rest is easy.

Above all, never be too original! If you bring out, newly polished and smugly wiped, the stale conventions, the worn-out melodramas, and petty bathos, which

amused yesterday, to-day will gladly keep you alive. But if, in a moment of exaltation, you pen an original thought, express an opinion which towers over the mediocre, the mob rises in its wrath and leaves you to—poverty, or the newspapers.

Only where there are intellectual dictators strong enough to lead the mob into the right path, can literature exist. We have not had those; the newspapers have betrayed our trust. As long as blind force of sheer numbers dictates the taste of the country; as long as the fool's mirage of Equality shall delude every man into believing that his neighbor has no right or title to be wiser than himself,—our literature, despite its apparent rankness of growth, will be as the weakling the Spartans killed lest it become deformity. Until then, our coat of arms—to paraphrase a onetime invention of Ambrose Bierce's, should be: An illiterate hoodlum, rampant, on a field of dead authors. Motto: "To—with Literature!"

### CHAPTER THREE

SINCE the day when personal journalism—in the fine sense of the term—died out in America, the average newspaper here has pandered only to the mob. If, in that generic term, we include the mob of millionaires, we include what, socially, is its most dangerous element. Anarchically considered, there is nothing to choose, for social danger, between the hooligan and the plutocrat. Artistically considered, the difference is but slightly greater. Walter Harte might have found the millionaire Maecenas of to-day—for those robber chieftains, the Medici, have ever their replicas—but I could also have pointed out to him other millionaires whose influence on the arts has been as baleful as that of an illiterate, insensate majority. Let us then—letting go the financial depths of its component atoms—say that the mob has been all that most newspapers have cared for.

What the mob likes, the newspaper has proclaimed. That like, too, it has defined as the aim of imaginative literature. The authors who had the canny facility in compromise that made for success, found, through the newspapers, what the mob wanted; they provided that; and the rest of us were asked to consider it literature.

I beg to be excused.

Man, in the individual, is occasionally possessed of intelligence; in the mass he has only instincts. Catering to mob-instincts is not literature. Our newspapers have seldom done anything else, nor permitted literature that did anything else.

It is as easy to specify, as it is to generalise. In the years that I did my best to review current literature as honestly as I could, I noted some amazing dishonesties,

and some hideous stultification, on the part of those who through our newspapers are supposed to mould the public taste in books. It was impossible to keep chapter and verse of them all. But I can cite enough instances; and for the rest I can count upon it that if I jog your memory you will, yourself, recall the entire lickspittle attitude of these fellows.

Newspaper criticism here has been little but cuckoo criticism. In the days when we took all our successes from abroad, our newspapers simply echoed London. To-day, when successes are home-grown, they echo one another, and the publishers. In the average book review you see in the average newspaper, there is too little intelligence or honesty. This need not matter so much, save inasmuch as thereby the public taste is vitiated, and American fiction in danger of being coddled to death.

How this pampering which newspapers bestow on any and every novel, results in a weedy crop, my previous chapters have pointed out. The case is comparable to a period of bubble speculation in Wall Street; there is a time of tremendous inflation—then suddenly, and for the best of reasons, the bottom drops out, the bubble bursts, and the world sees the airy fabric it has been duped into thinking too, too solid. American writing, in its vigor, its rankness, no longer needs any pampering; only the most vigorous pruning. What passes for criticism in our newspapers is little but a chorus of adulation. It means, consequently, absolutely nothing.

Just as publishers hold that any fool, so he be notorious, can write a book that they can sell, so our newspaper publishers, hold, apparently, the theory that any knave or fool can pass judgment on the art of letters. They let anybody, useless for anything else, review their books; they do not enquire if their reviewers have either education or taste. The detail of being themselves able to write is inessential.



If ever individuals deserved pillory, they are they who emit some of the slush which, in journals of supposedly high standing, passes as review of current literature. Who are these men? For it comes, in these matters, always to the personal equation. Criticism at its best, I will ever maintain, is nothing but the honest expression of personal impressions; it can have worth only when the personality behind it has the taste, the artistic instinct and the stern righteousness which separate wheat from tares; can feel the spirit in other artists, and spot the shoddy and the mountebank. Who, then, were these persons who for years kept American newspaper criticism in a state where it was only press-work for the publishers? If I knew, I would be glad to name them; to name merely the crime is to be cowardly as they themselves. But, in most cases, the discreet veil of anonymity has hidden everything save the names of the newspapers printing this flood of meaningless eulogy.

The Chicago *Times-Herald*, I remember, once wrote this, of a story which, worthless in the first place, is already utterly forgotten: "more original than 'Richard Carvel,' more vital than 'Janice Meredith,' more cohesive than 'To Have and to Hold.'" Now that sentence has the entire vicious method compressed into it. One "best seller" is boosted recklessly into prominence; then, when its fame wanes, it is still used by way of comparison. Not one of those three stories now survives, yet the wealth of bombast and imagery employed by that reviewer was such as a discriminating critic would have hesitated to apply to "Vanity Fair." I can cite no more eloquent specimen of the pampering that passes, in our newspapers, for criticism.

All such so-called critics were after was to say something which, copied by the book-publishers into their advertisements of a story alleged to be selling in six figures, might show their own power in gauging the popular

taste. I say nothing of the secondary consideration of selling the publishers a book of their own; literature is not yet, in that detail, as full of highwaymen as is the drama and dramatic criticism.

For several seasons there was a veritable flood of stories advertised in America as "greater than David Harum." Every avenue in mediocrity was filled with rubbish, while every critical column and advertising column shrieked loudly the names of the newest "great" novel. How many of those "great" novels now survive?

The *Post*, of Washington, made itself infamous by asking blandly, some time after Graham Balfour had issued the official Life of Robert Louis Stevenson: "Who is William Ernest Henley anyway?" If that was actually ignorance, then it is a more terrible indictment of American newspapers than anything one could invent. That the poet who wrote the "In Hospital" verses, rivaling Whitman in freedom from the old metric rules; who wrote those wonderful stanzas beginning "Out of the night that covers me. . . ."; who furthered, as editor, the fortunes of Kipling, Kenneth Grahame, H. B. Marriott-Watson, and Wm. Nicholson, the artist; was unknown to that newspaper, was characteristic of our average newspaper attitude toward artistic affairs. If, on the other hand, the question was meant as an insult—well, then the *Washington Post* deserved still more the contempt of all intelligent people.

An example of ignorance on the part of the *Christian Union* I have already quoted. That, however, was atoned for, by the very discriminating review which followed their discovery of a "new man," Ambrose Bierce. I could cite flagrant cases by merely picking up the day's paper, and picking random lines. Such authorities as the *St. Paul Dispatch*, the *Brooklyn Eagle*, and the *Milwaukee Press* agreed that George Cary Eggleston was a considerable author; when I tried to read a book of his ("Blind Alleys") I found in it a sentence stat-

ing that "there was very nearly nothing ordinarily in common between them"; after that I lost my respect for those newspapers.

The crux of the whole matter, of course, is that there is, in the average American newspaper, too little criticism which is not dominated by the "business office," that is, by the advertising patronage. This does not only apply to the arts. Those reading between the lines have long seen that not only is news "colored" to suit the commercial prejudices of the different papers; but that the actual editorial comment, the criticism of men and matters, is seldom so subservient to principles as to profits. On this, once again, I would refer you to the admirable pamphlet called "The Myth of a Free Press," adding only a few personal observations of my own.

The correspondents employed to cable European news to America rarely favor us with anything which has not a commercial basis for its publicity. The arts of Europe are seldom mentioned unless an American manager has just bought a new play, or a publisher a book.

At home, and abroad, in fact, our arts are at the mercy of the press-agent. Dramatic criticism has not existed in New York for some years. Press-agents write our plays, and—openly or secretly—conduct the so-called critical columns in the dailies. They become rich; while the author who thinks his work can speak for itself, is soon taught the error of his ways, and shown the way to the poorhouse—or compromise. With all their power, these men—especially those posted on the European frontiers—are amazingly stupid. They rarely find anything until some town has become tired of it years ago; or until something else leads them to it. Just as I have wondered who the newspaper critics of books were, so I have wished I might meet face to face those knights of

the press-agents' round-table who are represented annually as scouring Europe for novelties. There is no richer field than the one before them; yet for all they discover there of novelty, they might be so many sheep; nothing they find is less than two years old, and has the seal of all Europe on it.

No; if they would only confine their energies to cabling home the important announcement that Mr. and Mrs. Plazaza, in their ninety-and-nine h.p. Odol car, have just reached the Splits Hotel, they would be keeping more wisely within the limits of their intelligence.

I have known some of these slaves of the cable. Let me tell here an episode that has bearing on the whole matter of the newspaper writer and his trade, as well as on the naïve nature of that particular Franco-American. We had been workers in the same vineyard on this side of the water. Meeting him in Paris during the summer in which Edward 7th's illness delayed his coronation, he filled me with the tale of his woes. He was the Paris cable correspondent for one of the metropolitan newspapers here. He told serio-comic stories of the detective-like duties they expected of him; how he had to become a key-hole-spy on this newly married American millionaire, and had to invent interviews with that captain of more or less notorious industry. He concluded, did this voluble naïve Frenchman.

"I tell you what it is, my dear fellow, I tell you: they ask of me things—things no gentleman can do." Then, after a pause, his face illuminated, "I tell you; why don't you take the job?"

Only after elaborate explanation, did he see the irony of his conclusion and his question. As it affected me, I laughed heartily enough; but as it threw light on what newspaper owners expect of their "buccaneers"—to use poor Harte's word—it was by no means matter for laughter.

This is perhaps as fit a place as any for a confession of my own. I have as critic of letters been singularly fortunate. For more than a decade I have reviewed current literature through the columns of at least one weekly paper which never gave me anything but a free hand. It supposed me to be honest; after that it asked no questions. Never, in all those years, have I been asked to trim my opinions to suit the advertising columns.

One of the secrets of the absolutely free hand I had was that to all intents publishers' advertisements were excluded from the paper's columns.

In that office, indeed, I had the satisfaction of seeing a cheap sort of pirate publisher practically kicked out of the office for insinuating that certain published censure had for object only the forcing him into advertising. The fellow, after that, could not have bought "space" in those columns for love or money.

On another occasion I came up against the sort of critic to whom we owe our present rank condition in the arts, and his effort to employ "office politics" against me, whose only weapons were honesty and the strength of my opinions, came happily to naught. Notoriously a press-agent in guise of a critic, he was extremely shrewd in selling plays as well as criticism. Being at that time myself a critic of the theatre, I was one evening assigned to review a play by this gentleman. If it had been good and he had been my bitterest enemy, I would have been glad to say so; it struck me as very bad indeed—I have happily forgotten it; it was a war-play of some sort; the word Cumberland was in the title, I think—and I told the public so. Whereupon he committed the indiscretion of informing my employer that I was nursing a private feud, and was therefore unfit to figure as critic. My employer believed my honesty before the other's chicanery, and I was left unmolested as critic. But you see, do you not, what I meant, a few pages before, when I said that simply to write and be honest was not enough;



that skill in intrigue was the greater quality for success. This man, you see, at once took to what he supposed was the most powerful weapon in his world.

My own case, my not being interfered with, was, I believe, so exceptional, that I shall be as delighted as astonished if I can hear of its being paralleled. How glad I would be to know that there were other critics who had never had to subdue their candor to either compromise or advertising contracts!

In just one way could the conditions of criticism in most American newspapers be reformed. Only when publishing advertisements are subjected to the same censorship as are patent medicine advertisements, or when they are refused altogether, will criticism be able to raise its head.

As long as the publishers are allowed to shout themselves hoarse in the advertisements, so long will the reviewers be the "pawns of their stomachs." Even if we suppose the critic's paragraph of censure is printed, what will it avail against the shriek of the double-column "display ad."? When the public sees in huge type the lie that a certain story is greater than all other stories, it can hardly be blamed for taking the bait.

The blame may not logically be placed on the publishers.

These are confessedly commercial gentlemen; the fact that they are merchants in art does not lessen their need to employ mercantile methods.

When you saw the flaming advertisements of such and such a novel, with amazing adjectives credited to this or that prominent journal, did it never occur to you that most of those phrases are as much part of the publishers's paraphernalia as his printing-press? Books published to-day, either in England or America, are often accompanied by various specimen stereotyped

"criticisms" in all the extremes of eulogy. The publishers, in thus jogging the reviewers, put a premium on laziness and lying; but their argument is commercially shrewd enough. They argue that it is mostly the office-idiot who "does the books"; and such overworked hireling is not likely to spill his own brains and time when he has ready-made phrases at his scissors' point. To assure the lay mind that I am not writing wildly, I will say that I have—in my voluminous collection of other polite literary lies,—quite sufficient evidence of this sort to prove a far weaker case.

All of which reminds me of an ancient fantasy I once proposed for the general entertainment. It was "To Promote Leisure Among Critics," and I wrote it years ago; but it still holds good. Let me append it verbatim:

A number of persons, of the kind referred to in the technical journals as Nature's Noblemen, might have been seen a few days ago entering the Home for Incurable Philanthropists. They were publishers, and they were come at call of the secretary of the society for the Propagation of Leisure among Book Reviewers.

Having hung their hats where the draught could fan them, these good men sat down in solemn circle. The real business of interest began when the senior member of the great firm that first introduced smooth poetry on rough paper, as against rough poetry on smooth paper, arose, and, coughing politely, said:

"You have asked the committee, for which I now speak, to draft a series of formulas to be used to the end that the down-trodden critic may have his hard lot eased a little. It has been—need I say it—a labor of love. I will read a rough draft of the documents we have prepared.

"In the first place, we have decided that all authors, before they obtain the glory of our imprint, must agree to write a synopsis of one-hundred words containing all

the things the critic really need know. We reserve the right to syndicate these synopses as prose-pastels. They are to be in English, French, German, Italian, and Journallese, and in every case to be signed by the author.

"Also, the author shall invariably read carefully the first copy of his book leaving the press, with a view to finding errors in his own style. He shall prepare a careful list of all such mistakes, as also of errors in proof-reading. A list of these, accompanied by some appropriate and new jest, such as the one about 'See the pale martyr with his shirt on fire' is to go to the reviewer, so that he can be properly facetious on that score.

"In every case, our head reader is to spend several days at the Astor Library, searching for evidences of the similarity between the new work and one already in existence. Can such likeness be discovered, a leading satirist is to be employed to slate the new book as a plagiarism. Proof slips of this accusation are to be sent to all reviewers. This has been found wonderfully stimulating to our sales.

"For the use of critics employing the Methode Jeanette we propose that all really readable chapters in new novels be printed separately on slips and introduced by such sentences as: 'It is in descriptions such as this that Mr. Lawfurd excels,' or 'It is this passage that the *Saturday Review* has called greater than Tolstoy.'

"Every week each reviewer is to be supplied with a new list of adjectives, commendatory and otherwise, specially prepared by one of our bright young men from a Dictionary of Synonyms.

"In the case of books of Memoirs, a column of anecdotes culled from them is to be sent to the critics under personal cover. Where it is a collection of stories that have appeared before in the magazines, paragraphs are to be prepared on this plan: 'Very few people, I dare say, remember that gem of a story that appeared in the *Old Stiff's Monthly* in '85, but it impressed me, I recol-

lect, very forcibly, so that I said then—Here is an author who will do great things, etc., etc.’ The use of these will give the criticisms a note of personal interest very hard to obtain under the old system of having reviewers read the books themselves, instead of the reviews we prepare for them.

“Finally, where a reviewer should feel tempted to say nothing whatever about a book, we have decided to furnish him with a blank——”

At this moment a tall individual, well known as the junior member of the firm that gives a pink tea with every one of its publications, rose to a point of order.

“I beg your pardon,” he said, “but how can we possibly furnish him with a blank for saying nothing whatever?”

“I repeat that I suggested furnishing him with a blank——”

“Absurd!” again interrupted the other. “All reviewers already have blanks. That is all they have. If they had anything else this society of ours would not be. If——”

At this juncture, it is sad to relate, there arose that difficulty in the unraveling of which the society broke up in some disorder. But who can doubt that much good had been done?

Now, flippant as that may seem on its surface, it is based seriously on actual facts.

The list of American newspapers who maintain a critic independent of the “business office” is so small that I do not trust myself to hint it.

In short, the same thing applies to our newspaper writers which applies to our novelists. The day of the underpaid, drunken, pariah-like journalist may be at an end; and instead of that we hear almost as much of the wonderful wages paid a Brisbane, as we do of the royal-

ties earned on a "Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch"; but has the quality of the man risen or fallen? I have shown how in our rabbit-like fecundity we are killing those novelists who would also be artists. I verily believe, too, that the vagabond and sot of an elder period was a more honest writer than the newspaper "critic" of to-day who gets his "puffs" printed large in the "display ads." of the publishers.

I say this in full memory of the Nym Crinkles who, however brilliant, brought American dramatic criticism into such ill-repute a generation or so ago.

Whether fame or infamy be their reward, the newspapers have certainly done some remarkable things where they have touched on literature. In general, they have made the taste of our people—what it is; and they have permitted the notoriety and prosperity of those mediocrities who for several decades have obscured our horizon. They have hindered as much as helped the men of real talent. If they lifted Edwin Markham into momentary eminence, they chose his least artistic utterance as excuse. A San Francisco journal gained a peculiarly horrid renown by refusing a famous story by Kipling when that genius first landed there from the Orient. I retain, in my documentary chamber of horrors, the printed evidence of certain public lying committed in 1898 by Messrs. Richard Harding Davis and Frederic Remington on the subject of cruelty to women committed by Spaniards; the one signed an account, the other drew a large sketch, of what never happened; and all this was done at instigation of a so-called newspaper of metropolitan pretensions. Why should one believe these "buccaneers" at one time more than another? Where they falsify facts, are they to be believed honest in opinions on art?

Not even my own insignificance has escaped the illogical energies of that curious crew, the newspaper



critics. Concerning a volume of stories which one critic was good enough to compare for psychology to the work of Marcel Prevost, a Chicago paper called the author "a disciple of Le Gallienne, while *not so forceful*," and a St. Louis paper said the book's style "reminds one of Le Gallienne's *Golden Girl*, though it is *more masculine*." If you can adjust those two statements, you can doubtless also square a circle. . . . Of a novel one critic averred that it reminded of Mallock's "Romance of the Nineteenth Century," another that it had "genuine Gertrude-Athertonian fervor." The author might take his choice. . . . A satiric story sent out anonymously was attributed by the critics to Wm. Marion Reedy, Gertrude Atherton and Richard Harding Davis; one set of critics declared it the work of an unlettered amateur, another averred only one of the most practised craftsmen could have written it. . . . Of certain stories in picaresque vein I learned that "the spirit of imitation is over them all," yet the hero was held to be "an exceptional character." This book, by the way, stirred the author of "The Affair at Coulter's Notch" to this reminiscence:

"That is unnatural. Your hero would not have thrown shot and shell into his own dwelling rather than explain matters to his brigade commander," said a critic.

"The person that you have in mind would not," replied the author of the story criticised, "I ventured to think that I might interest the reader in one that would."

From the anonymous criticism in newspapers, taste, intelligence and good writing issue so rarely that it might as well be non-existent. It is not in my mind here to discuss the old, worn topic of anonymity, which comes up often enough. My readers know, by now, that my theory of useful criticism bars both the academic and the anonymous; each year makes those old shibboleths more falla-

cious. The fact that I myself have in the past had to work under the veil has but made me more steadfast in my view; nor did I ever seek to disguise my personality of my own accord. If my work as critic did not impress the value of my name on American publicists, the fault did not lie with me.

The public, of course, long ago ceased paying any attention to the average newspaper criticism. Patient and stupid as it is, it could not fail to perceive the absurdity in opinions and adjectives that spilled equal eulogy on everything. It gave the problem up altogether; it trusted entirely to whatever, at the moment, happened to be the fashion, and the subject of the loudest noise in the advertising pages. It admitted, frankly, that the artistic was out of question; only commercial figures, only the arguments of sheer quantity, seemed worth noting.

The American press pretends, I believe, to a large share in the education of the human mass. If seeking always the lowest intellectual level of the greatest possible number be education, that pretense has truth behind it. But if truth-telling, if honesty of opinion without self-seeking or profit, if castigating the sinners rather than vamping cannily about the sin, have anything to do with it, then the press of America has been abominably blameworthy.

What, then, of criticism outside the newspapers? Has there been real criticism, real censorship?

Let us see.

## CHAPTER FOUR

IF American criticism had been other than a mirage for the last quarter of a century, we would be able, you will admit, to name the critics. Whom, then, may we name in the same breath with Andrew Lang, Walter Pater, Hermann Bahr, F. Sarcey, Georg Brandes or Herbert Paul? Or, to come to conspicuous moderns: George Moore, Oscar Wilde, Bernard Shaw, Arthur Symonds, Walter Frewen Lord, or Catulle Mendés?

Not only do I defy you to name an equal list; I aver that in criticism upon all the arts—of music, painting, drama and literature—America has not more than a handful of fine and honest workmen. Instead of criticism we have commercialism. The one has erased the other. With any critics deserving the name, the dollar could not have ousted all other considerations from American art.

In plain logic, I need not have asked that question: have we critics in America? since the condition of our letters,—the dominance of mediocrities in fiction, and the utter absence of any vigor in the finer provinces of written art—eloquently proves criticism absent.

Criticism has been written, it is true, outside the newspapers. But in what has its tone differed from the pampering attitude of the journals? We had a Julian Hawthorne using a distinguished name to promulgate such assertions as "we have lately seen George Du Maurier write the novels of three seasons, one after the other." Which was not only a misstatement of fact, but an unnecessary one. Whatever "Trilby" may have been—and I recall that when Georg Brandes visited London in 1896, he was amazed at "that farrago of hopeless ab-

surdity, compound of diluted Murger and Dumas' 'Lady of the Camelias,' served up with hypnotism and hocus-pocus for grown-up infants"—neither "Peter Ibbetson" nor "The Martians," artistic achievements aside, ever so much as came within miles of being "best sellers."

There, then, you see, what some of our supposedly considerable writers descended to in mistaking log-rolling for criticism.

The essence of the whole matter is that the pampering attitude, as to a so-called "infant industry," has not only been maintained by our pretending critics, but has even, as theory and practise, been openly defended by them. You have already been reminded of the "Let them all in!" invitations issued from time to time by such distinguished authorities as Professor William James, and William Dean Howells. They hesitated to bar the gate against the fools, lest some rare genius might be shut out. Another professor, Brander Matthews, went further.

The function of the literary critic, he declared, is to expound, not to judge.

In other words, the critic is to be merely an unsalaried press-agent for the publishers. This theory was delivered and signed within the decade; its practise has grown until now there is hardly any other sort of criticism left; and the result on our letters is obvious.

There was nothing new in the theory. It merited no more attention than any other of the million stupidities of the passing day, but for the apparent prominence of its author. Mr. Matthews being known as professor of literature at a prominent college, and as author of a number of polite prose volumes, was generally taken to be an authority on matters literary. He represented, to some eyes, Those in Authority over American Letters. It was true that his position and his energies had seldom been other than those of an amiable dilettante; it was true that the theory in question had been decried in former essays of his own; but it was equally true that the ma-

jority rarely pauses to consider such inconsistent logic. Simply because of the number of his volumes, and the polite attention with which the Eastern literary coteries greet any verdict of his, a large public doubtless considered him seriously as an authority. Yet, if his earlier opinions on the function of criticism were worth anything, his later ones could be worth nothing.

To say nothing of the terrifying spectacle to-day confronting the candid observer, was there not already, when this eminent optimist proclaimed the critical functions, too much of mere echoings of plots, too much mere repetition of what the publishers wished said? How many pages were there in the daily, the weekly, the monthly prints, wherein you might find book criticism of any decent standard in honesty and readability? Where were you to look for reviews without the taints of ignorance, carelessness, or advertisement? Yet, in that condition of things critical Mr. Matthews proclaimed his theory that exposition, not judgment, was the full duty of the critic!

The critic, if he deserves his title, has a tremendous duty. He stands at the gateway between the publishers and the public. His chief duty is to the public. Next, to the author. Not at all to the publisher. The publisher is an impertinent middleman who should have no place at all in the consideration of the reviewer; a fact we have by now done our best utterly to forget.

The methods of the theatre have been successfully employed in the book business. Daily we note in the methods of booksellers the equivalent to that profitable if impudent announcement, wherein Mr. Solomon Isaacs informed his clients that such and such a farce was the very funniest he had ever produced. Exactly so do we have paraded before us the opinions of the publishers on their own books. The worst of it is that some of us are so innocent of humor and logic as to be impressed by this



bold quackery. Yet they talk of American humor! Or perhaps, again, the device succeeds because we humorously admire its very brazen effrontery? Worse yet! That attitude of tolerance is one of the most lamentable features in our national temper.

Observe where, to keep to the domain of letters, it has led us. We are, to all intents, without great criticism in this country. The farther we go along the path indicated by the professors, the more impossible we make it for not only great criticism but valuable literature to survive.

The reading public needs protection more than ever before. Not only is time too valuable, but the influence toward general intellectual mediocrity is too great for the present deluge of printed rubbish to be allowed continuance. We have heard a good deal in late years of the league between the police and crime. The police, as we know, exist, in theory, to protect society against the lawless. Yet, despite occasional waves of reform and investigation, in almost every civic centre of the land there notoriously exists a league between the police and the powers that prey. The police, when pressed, invariably claim that without such league with the lawless society could not effectively be protected. Exactly the same state of things exists in the literary world.

The critic should be in the policeman's position. It is his duty to protect the reading public against the publisher. Instead of which, nine times out of ten he is openly in league with the publisher. The same specious argument is used here, too; critics of this sort pretend they cannot properly serve the public unless they first learn the needs and views of the publisher. In this league, as we have seen, newspapers seem criminally implicated. A critic's business, his employers maintain, is to achieve a line or a paragraph that will look well in an advertisement. For, if the publisher, seizing that line, spreads it broadcast, is not that also a splendid puff for the

newspaper that originated it? And so on, to the end of the nauseating chapter. A league between the police and the criminal could do no greater harm to the intelligent people of America, than a league between publishers and critics.

It is obvious that the critic with a mind single toward the reading public and the noble language of our race, has a lonely way before him. Friends desert, and enemies multiply; publishers, if he lay about among their tin idols censoriously, will proclaim him a blackmailer trying to force publication of his own books. At the least, he will hear the rumor of his private failures having driven him to dog-in-the-manger attitudes.

None of these barriers must stop him. Let him think of Pope, and Swift, and Poe and Byron.

If he would satisfy his conscience, and his sense of what is due the art of letters as against the abominable lowering of the public taste, the critic must go on relentlessly damning the incompetents, and striving, day after day, to bring the majority to realise the difference between what is genuine and what is shoddy. He must, if he can, ridicule the charlatans and the shoddy-mongers until they leave literature alone. At the end, he may find himself isolated; hated, and worn out; but he will have served soldierly in as great a cause as ever man lifted pen for. It is a cause that cries to heaven. For unless the flood of shoddy is stopped, the public taste will perish utterly. The majority is too ignorant and indolent, too waxen in the hands of those who subtly fashion the advertisements and dictate the "criticism." The mere might of numbers (so worshiped by our professors) awes and deludes the majority. If a book has sold into six figures, that seems argument enough. The majority wishes to be like, never to be different.

You may say:—ah, but they can't make us read books we don't want to read! They not only can, but they do; for, unfortunately, you don't know what you do

want, and the whole national attitude on art is still one of imitation and mob-rule.

That men of the type of our professors, men of taste, able—and they would!—to stand at the gateway through which the vitiating flood now pours, should adopt this over-tolerant pose is the worst feature in the whole matter. “Let us go easy,” they intimate, “let the publishers and the authors prosper; why quarrel with all this successful business?” So cry the “easy bosses” of literature. To employ the bludgeon is no longer genteel; it smacks of a by-gone brutal age; it is rude, and unmannerly. Moreover, if you use it, they will see to it that you are put on the “blacklist” so as to persuade you to repentance.

Bah! Such sniveling makes one sick!

What we need is critics unafraid, dowered with taste to tell the true from the sham, and with courage to spread the tale. Critics whose only duty is toward the public and the art of letters. Any mass, any public, you may say, is sure to be held in contempt by critics of taste and discrimination? And even so? What then? A critic may think ill of the majority, and may yet, because of what he would have that majority be, labor daily on behalf of its intellectual salvation. A critic may think the present case of letters woefully low and sordid, and yet write valiantly in the cause of its uplifting.

The critic must have that God-given quality—taste. If he have not that, he may have all the classicism in the world, and yet fail as keeper of the gate. He must not be a book-worm, or a closet-man. He must have ears and eyes open for the mental attitude of the man on the street, as well as for that of the brainless beauty in the boudoir, or the student in the garret. (With which reflection, indeed, I began this book!) He must be able to appreciate the most diverse talents; the brute vigor of a Kipling, the polished calm of a Pater, the involutions

of a James, and the unvarnished earnestness of an Ather-ton. He must be staunch against the lures of commerce, the clamor of ill-considered acclaim. Above all, he must have no scruples about doing his best to keep literature clear of the incompetents. Writing bad books is far too easy to-day; one of the reasons for the brazenness with which it is achieved is that there is no adequate punishment. The critic should be prepared to punish. To deprive him of the punitive power is to assure the ultimate rot of American literature.

In another department of the arts, I remember, we were treated, not long since, to an opinion similar to that of Mr. Matthews. A St. Louis critic of the theatre confessed that he held it the duty of his position to acclaim what was sure to please, irrespective of whether he thought it ought to please. In other words, if the public taste was declining at the rate of a mile a minute, he had no obligation other than to decline with it. A fine theory, indeed! All our arts need criticism; criticism based on sure and sane taste, so that the public shall be uplifted rather than allowed to mire in the muck of its natural mediocrity, and that the purveyors of plays and of books be made afraid to palm off the spurious and the vicious.

In the domain of the playhouse, as in that of publishing, the production of the unworthy is lamentably easy. The notion that any young woman with decent presence can take to the theatre for a livelihood is still as prevalent as that any fool can write a book. The notion is quite true; these things not only can be done, but are. How many charming young women do we not all know, in every possible province of society, who are convinced, in moments of discontent with the routine of life, that they are adapted for a stage career? If you ask on what that conviction is based, you will receive, if any reply at all, merely a stare signifying that you

must be blind to certain obvious charms of face and figure. Exactly; there is the point!

Every pretty little idiot, endowed by that amiable jester, nature, with an attractive countenance, a graceful manner, a voice, a pair of arms and the same number of legs—who is not, in brief, absolutely deformed—thinks she has the entire quota of requirements for the theatre. The abomination of all of which is, that in the present state of theatrical criticism, she is right. Modern playgoers, educated by the modern play-critic, will excuse, even applaud, a theatrical article that is not one solitary thing other than a vehicle for an exhibition of good-looking women. "There was no plot," you declare, or, "the music was vapid," or, "the lines were dull." All the answer from the average playgoer is that "it was the prettiest bunch of girls in any show this season." That the theatre has other purposes than exhibiting the females of our race is rarely hinted. Between our present attitude toward the theatre, and the condition in that Alexandria which Louys painted in his "Aphrodite" there is not one atom of difference. This attitude most of our critics are determined to continue. It is true that in many of our metropolitan towns efforts are made from time to time to put the theatre on a non-commercial basis. Mostly, however, these are sporadic outbursts; mostly failure attends them.

About "independent theatre" movements, I do not speak without authority. Some ten years or so ago, I was myself active in such an enterprise. Its name was the *Criterion Independent Theatre*. Beyond what notoriety might indirectly accrue to the periodical instigating it, this effort to divorce our drama from the box-office had no other objects save artistic ones. Yet, had you heard the hullabaloo raised by the conservatives, by all the various partners in the league between managers, critics and newspapers to inflict an entirely commercial



drama on the community, you would have thought we were nothing less than "second-story men."

Even in our small circle there may have been black or dingy sheep; but, in the main, we were all simply fighting for art and truth as we saw them. On that staff of the *Criterion* were assembled, among others, such men as Vance Thompson, Bliss Carman, Charles Henry Meltzer, Walter Blackburn Harte, Chas. F. Nirdlinger and myself. The paper had been put editorially in charge of an Americanised Frenchman, Henri Dumay, and he applied—for perhaps the first and only time in the history of American journalism—the system of letting each man write just what he chose to write. As a result New York had, for about a year, the first paper that had been able to "make it sit up" since the earliest days of militant journalism. The paper had those qualities—on the importance of which in all critical writing I have so insisted throughout this book—personality, and prejudice.

Eventually the paper succumbed to the increasing cowardice of its business managers. But it had not been wasted. It had shown what was possible. Never again could the croakers say that what the French do, we could not do also. Also, before the end came, we had our effort at an Independent Theatre, and—no small matter, we added materially to the score of our enemies.

The history of one independent theatre differs but little from that of another. Whether it is that theatre which produced George Moore's "Bending of the Bough," or that one—in which I had share—which first produced Ibsen's "Borkmann" in America, or that Irish plan which included the poetry of W. B. Yeats; they all run along similar grooves. Of ours I recall only that we took the old Madison Square Theatre on some occasions, the Berkeley Lyceum on others. In the former we gave "Borkmann," with the late E. J. Henley in the name-part. In the latter we gave the first American perform-

ance of Echegaray's "El Gran Galeoto," from which Chas. F. Nirdlinger eventually made his admirable and successful play "The World and His Wife." If we had done nothing else than present those plays from the Spanish and the Scandinavian, we surely accomplished something.

Our plans, of course, had been large. We had meant to draw upon the work of Becque, Strindberg, Porto-Riche, Brandes, Giacosa, and many others whose names were still Greek to our majority. Just as in our paper we were all many years ahead of the mob—I myself was already tiring of dinning G. B. Shaw into those who, ten years later, adopted him as the fashion!—so in our theatre we were impertinently too soon. Our paper assumed all prospective losses; we, the members of the staff, assumed literary control. We hoped to prove that the theatre had another mission than only to amuse. What else is the aim of that New Theatre which certain of our millionaires lately decided to support?

Aside from artistic achievements the most pronounced result gained was the bitter opposition of the newspapers and managers. You would have thought, to listen to them, that we were the veriest rogues unhung. It is true there had, on the part of some of our crew, been some unnecessary truth-telling anent conditions in the theatre. Hard names had been called; the dominance of the box-office had been pointed out in terms often more plain than pleasant. The gentlemen in charge of the box-offices fought back. And having all the heavy artillery and all the newspapers, naturally they prevailed. The most notoriously venal of the critics eagerly espoused the conquering cause; the New York newspaper whose reputation for malice is as deserved as its brilliance is spurious was foremost in the fight for our suppression. No opportunity to assail our integrity, and ridicule our achievements, was lost. No petty invention was too low for these fellows who felt their safety somewhat shaken. If

we had prevailed—Good Lord, such a thing as honest criticism might have become paramount in New York; and where would the pimps for “theatrical trusts” have been then?

For that was one wing of the battle, our assault upon a so-called “trust” that seemed to dominate the scene. The battle has waged from time to time ever since; one critic—James Metcalfe, who was also of our *Criterion* staff—even brought members of the trust into court, some years later, for refusing him entry into their theatres. The fight has often been obscured by changing of factions and positions; there have been dissensions within the trust; again the seceders have joined the old cabal until the latter emerged more impregnable than ever. But however the conflict has fared, or if at all,—we began the first assault. For which, I may say, none of those gentlemen has ever been properly grateful. Indeed, I have often suspected that they cherished the memory of us with a vindictiveness worthy of a larger aim.

It was in November, 1897, that our Independent Theatre made its bow. “Ted” Henley never again, I think, acted after that performance of “Borkmann.” Fine artist as he still was, his voice had already begun to show the corrosion of liquor. Consequently, he played the part of Ibsen’s ruined tradesman,—typical whiner at fate—in a sort of hoarse whisper which by no means detracted from the realism of the scene. Curiously enough, Henley himself had, as actor, reached that stage when he vaped lengthily of his successes and failures in the past, and became, indeed, tiresome enough with his curses at his luck. So you may appreciate the wit of James L. Ford’s remark anent this performance. We were in the Fifth Avenue Hotel, cooling our throats between the acts.

“What do you think of Borkmann?” I asked him.

“Borkmann,” said Ford, “h—! That’s nothing but Ted Henley at the Gilsey House!”

It was in the bar-room of the latter inn that the actor had for years been airing his griefs.

Whether we succeeded or failed—in any artistic analysis I think we succeeded—one thing at least we ever maintained: a high standard for both the theatre and its literature.

The apparent ease with which both these arts can be attempted constitute their greatest tragedy. Good looks in woman, notoriety in man; these seem the only essential passports to the theatre and the library. Technique is never thought of. That is what has saved music from a like calamity. The mere fool, the transparent charlatan, can go but a slight distance in music. Knowledge of technique is essential in both artist and critic. As a result we are not, in music, so hopelessly mired as in the other arts. We have, there, some real critics.

Whom have we in the theatre or in literature?

If we hesitate in answering that question, it is because the polite Nancies who object to censure have, so far, succeeded in preventing real criticism. Yet it is censure we must have. Far better if a few worthy artists are wrongfully censured than that the mass of incompetents go free. The critic must first impress upon the public that he is fit to judge; there must be in his judgments, his expressions of them, the something that will convince his readers he has license to sit upon the critical bench. That achieved, it is his province to use the position with all the rigor of a hanging judge. If by the fortune of his own endowments he has made sure of the attention of his audience; if he have the manner to compel attention; then must he never lose sight of his course's primal clause, namely, that he must protect the reading public from those who would prey on its time, ruin its taste, and debauch its intelligence.

That I have said this over and over, in this book, I

know as well as you; it is the burden of my song; it is what I must impress on you, I must even with Lewis Carroll "do it again and again."

Despite the increasing hysteria in the American temperament I still think there is sturdy honesty enough left to ensure victory to those critics who judge, rather than to those who echo, the publishers.

I have named the impersonal standard as no longer pertinent in American criticism. To be most impressive—indeed, to be of any vital effect—criticism must ever be the expression of a purely personal opinion. If you carry that argument to its logical conclusion, you will find that all this present case is but my apology for my own beliefs and writings.

Right! If I did not think that there may come again in America a public for criticism that has in it something of creation, for critics who guard the gate instead of holding it agape, I would surely never write another line in my life. Surely the nation is not yet so sodden in riches and content, that honesty and high thinking are become impossible? Much as I may in this book inveigh against the prevalence of other factors in our critical literature, if I did not think a turn for the better still possible—well, the laurels of a Don Quixote never appealed to me.

Do you remember what Emerson reported as one of Wordsworth's favorite topics? The Lake poet repeated, time and again, of our American society, that it was being "enlightened by a superficial tuition, out of all proportion to its being restrained by moral culture."

Barring that the word "enlightened" is carelessly used; since he really meant "benighted"; that sentence sketches precisely the picture on which I have tried to insist. A society utterly without taste in language or letters; a growing generation in the proletariat whose speech is an amalgam of mongrel European-English and



profanity; and a moral sense knowing the dictates only of money-bags at one extreme and Mafia societies at the other.

To deal with these problems they ask us to wear kid gloves!

What is needed is the mailed fist.

## CHAPTER FIVE

THE domain of the theatre has more than once afforded arguments pointing to the lamentable state to which criticism has brought American literature. For, if I have done anything at all in these pages, I have shown that the prevailing "prosperity boom" in "best sellers" has nothing to do with literature. The hacks and the time-servers may be getting rich; honest artists are, if anything, in worse straits than before.

It was those honest workmen I had in mind when, some time since, I found myself contrasting, somewhat unhappily, the difference between author and actor. It was at a moment when the public was being implored once again for contributions to the maintenance of a Home for Aged and Infirm American Actors. The theatric pages of our newspapers were filled with this benevolent enterprise; many kept subscription lists open; editorial encouragement to our philanthropy was not lacking.

The actor, in short, whether active and full of postures, or infirm and feeble, is ever with us. And where, meanwhile, are the authors to whom these players owe their bread and butter? (Again let me insist: I do not write of the exceptional fortunates who have lately been allowed to share in the "prosperity.") Was there ever, outside of France, an individual, or a newspaper, so rash as to propose a Home for Aged and Infirm Authors?

The absurdity in this is but seeming. The actors who gather prosperity from the general inability to tell art from noise are many; the authors who, with all the wind blown into their sails by our "press-agents of prosperity," manage to make a decent wage from letters, are few and far between. It is true that the lot of the

canny trader upon the publisher's demands is to-day fairly enviable—we have seen how it occasionally runs to motor-cars, estates in the country, and villas in Versailles—but the workman who will not cut his cloth for the market is in no better case than before. And even counting in the exceptions with the rules, compared to the pages on pages devoted to mummers in our public prints—what is the special literature of the bookish but a drop in the bucket?

The very ratio in which the principals to a new play are advertised tells the tale. First we are given the name of the speculator who is to produce the play, as the jargon has it; who furnishes the money and the authority. His name is writ largest on the bills; as if, forsooth, in buying the article he had become its creator. (That is the infantile reasoning whereby the late millionaire Whitney, buying the favorite for the Derby, thought to achieve reputation as a sportsman.) Next in importance comes the actor, the fellow who repeats what another invented. That other, least and last, is the author. Indeed, often the author is not mentioned at all.

What is true of the advertisement, is also true of the actual bill-of-the-play; there you discover the name of the costumer as easily as that of the author. As in print, so in the visual life of the town. The actor obstructs the view. We may escape them in print, or even in the play-house; but if we venture to take the air we run a risk; the mummer's strange and noisome apparel and habit confront us at almost every turn of certain urban districts.

In all this there is nothing new; neither the conditions nor documents on them appeal to the Athenian in us. Of all living creatures the actor, we know, is the most like the butterfly. His vogue passes and—nothing is left. He is a mere shell; a thing used, all its life, as a reed through which to blow the words, the poses and the sensations of others. The lowest of the arts, if one

at all, George Moore called it; Augustine Birrell denied the worthiness of the actor's calling. The author of "Masques and Mummers" tried to believe that "the exaltation of the puppet over the wit and ingenuity that give him the semblance of vitality was an exponent of conditions that, happily, are passing," but he knew, as he wrote, that he was but believing what he wished to believe. Those conditions increase rather than pass. The vanity of the actor is to-day more immeasurable than ever before.

Let an author run counter to the mummer's vanity, and all the machinery at the mummer's disposal will be used to rebuke him. Once, I remember, having contributed to a play the slight detail of writing every line of it, I had a telling little experience of my own.

April, 1907, saw the Broadway production of the piece. The critics were almost unanimous in condemning, among other factors, the casting and the acting. After I thought the worst of the tumult and the shouting over—in ten days or so after the first-night—I looked in to see for myself. The critics, for once, were quite right. The play was doomed the moment the parts were cast. I need name but one detail: the leading actor was what is known as a "character-actor" whose almost perfect English had yet an ineradicable trace of foreignness; the piece had, at his disposal, a "character" part, full of foreign turns and dialect. Did he take that part? By no means. And why? It is almost too absurd; but—friends of the toady type so frequent in actor-land had told him that he was the legitimate rival to—John Drew! And he had believed it! Which might have stirred me to greater laughter if my own play had not been used for the experiment. It was as if Yvette Guilbert attempted the mantle of Ellen Terry.

Whether the play was bad enough to fail in any event we had no chance to discover; it was doomed before it was put on. The critics, as I said, were quite right.

But when I myself vented a little chagrin publicly; when I called attention to what Bernard Shaw once declared the difference between the "literary play" and the "acting play,"—namely, that in the former the actors had to act, while in the latter the play acted for them—it was at once made clear to me that the only attitude expected of the average playwright towards the public performance of his work is that of the press-agent. What others declare aloud, he must not so much as whisper; even though it is his own artistic property which is being ruined. Let the author be ruined; as long as the actor's vanity is unruffled, what's the odds?

In conserving the mummer's vanity our American prototype of what used to be known in Germany as the *Backfisch* has had potent share. You may call her Matinee Girl, or Young Person from Westchester, or what you like; she is eternally the same. Her judgments have ever been obvious and sensual, in the finer sense. Imitative herself, she has yet had other imitators. She has originated nothing. In one year she apes the outlines of C. D. Gibson, in another a Christy serves her as model, and in yet another her ideal is a "Fluffy Ruffles"—which by no more than onomatopoeia indicates an omega of brainlessness. She thinks only in groups; individually her mind is a palimpsest. Though gowned in the newest mode, as created by others, mentally she is as blank as a mirror or an echo.

Nothing to be submitted against the American worship of players is more forcible than the Matinee Girl's devotion to them. Other writers have already set forth fully many other moot questions,—of the actor's being still morally the vagabond he once was legally, and of the nonsense between Church and Stage. The peculiarly American feature is the Matinee Girl. She goes to the play only for the sake of a handsome player or beautiful dresses. The author, for her, does not exist. In two



decades of "first-nights" I never found a woman who, of her own accord, made effort to discover the name of the author. Sometimes, when a fashion already existed; when the newspapers had given notoriety to this or that name; she might know it, and mouth it glibly as a parrot; but spontaneously—never. She might be as enthusiastic as you please on this player or that gown, that scene or that melody; but on the question of literary skill she was entirely blank.

This same bit of budding womanhood would exclaim to you gushingly upon the newest "best seller" and its author. The tone in which she asks you if you have read it implies that otherwise you will fall in her esteem. The different manner in which she approaches the stage and the novel is not, however, essentially contradictory; there is no intelligence employed; it is indeed merely a manner, just as there have been manners in shaking hands or putting down one's hat. To consider the actor happened to be the fashion; that was all; so was the surface familiarity with the names of novelists; the fashion of knowing the name of the playwright makes but slow progress.

The ranks of the Matinee Girl are recruited from no special social class: she signifies the mental trend of all that vast majority which takes its opinions wholesale.

When the player himself is no longer active—when the glare of publicity about him dims a little; when his performances and his intentions, his habits and his journeyings can no longer weary us because Time is dropping the curtain on him—does he sink to obscurity or poverty, as do less favored artists? By no means. For his age and his infirmity a flourishing Home exists.

With the atmosphere of such a Home it would be entertaining to let the imagination play. "Did you ever

see me in my great part," says one old man, "my great part, that the town went mad over?"

"Let me see," quavers the other dotard, "what was the name of the play?"

The first ancient, frowning tragically, vouchsafes:

"The play was 'Peter and Paul,' and my part was——"

The other, tactlessly interrupting, bobs his old head:

"Yes, yes: 'Peter and Paul.' Who wrote the thing?"

"I have forgotten," says the great has-been, and turns gloomily away.

As most actors forget, so do we, too; and many of us never knew. For the author who is also artist there is, at best, a bare living, some barren renown, and then—what? Legal contentions, after his death, about his miserable copyrights.

Why not as logically, then, an Author's Home? It is not impossible; Europe in Italy, and the Riviera, has already done something in this direction. If Europe needs such an asylum, America needs one still more. In our prevailing "boom" in letters, not to write becomes a distinction; the mere numbers of those attempting the profession of pen and ink—let us not, in this detail, call it an art!—inevitably make for a large proportion of those whom physically, as well mentally, we shall presently have to class as "infirm and aged." Should there not be as much provision for the writers as for those, their mere mouthpieces, who have waxed fat off them?

When the Actors' Home was still inviting subscriptions, I recall that a glance at the list filled me, anew, with the sense of Literature's slender prosperity. Where, in the ranks of writers, publishers, and readers, could you have found such evidence of liberality? Vagabonds, perhaps; but not misers, these mummers; let us grant them

that! Was not the fund started by a prominent manager's cheque for ten thousand dollars? What with genuine goodfellowship, and a little advertisement to be had from the publicity given the subscription lists, players and playgoers responded freely.

You could find humor, too, in those lists. These two items, I recall, elbowed each other: Tony Pastor, \$500; Richard Mansfield, \$250. The perennial Mr. Pastor, you see, whose music-hall talents had worn an opera-hat for so many years, could afford to double the donation of the player who, whatever else his enemies denied him, tried annually to produce a new play. If Mr. Mansfield had done nothing else, did he not deserve the thanks of the English-speaking world by playing so admirably at least two plays by Bernard Shaw, long before the fashion for that writer reached, in America, its somewhat absurd point?

Again let us take an anecdotic excursion:

Mr. Mansfield's joy in the profits from "The Devil's Disciple" was marred by somewhat too much of public praise for the author.

"Shaw, Shaw," exclaimed Mr. Mansfield, "I hear of nothing but the brilliant Mr. Shaw. It is rather tiresome."

"For shame, Dick," said the player's wife, "look at the money we are making from the piece. You are ungrateful. You should go down on your knees and thank the Lord for so good a play."

"I do, my dear, I do," said Mr. Mansfield, "but I add: Oh, Lord, why did it have to be by Shaw?"

The case of Mr. Mansfield, seriously considered, must ever constitute a curious page in the history of the arts in America. And inasmuch as I know, on this subject, some intimate and suggestive matters, I shall presently devote to it an entire chapter. Let us return to comparison of the mummer and the author.

We have seen that the profession of writing is not as ill-paid as it was. But with rewards competition, too, has increased. What with the starring system borrowed from the theatre, and the cheap fecundity of the incompetents, the real artist is still likely, at the end of many years' devotion to his Muse, to find himself but poorly paid. It is given only to the few to have, like Mr. Hopkinson Smith, the sister arts of painting and architecture to supplement the art of words. You may remember that a prominent publisher cannily advised an author to have other employment; you may recall, too, Mr. Bierce's retort. The majority of writers must ever, for eking out the meagre income from letters, turn to journalism. For an honest gentleman journalism is merely, as the author of "Intentions" put it, the old vulgarity writ large. The most striking instance of the death-in-life that journalism means for a man of letters is that of Walter Harte, the essayist; there, too, we have the most telling argument for just such a Home for Authors as I here spin theories about. Had such existed Walter Harte need not have died.

Mr. Harte wrote that "in spite of all the literary activity and the intellectual restlessness of our time, there are not probably more than half a dozen writers in the United States who follow literature, pure and simple, as a profession; and it is noteworthy that among these there are neither poets nor essayists—the backbone of belles-lettres."

That was written within the decade; the man who wrote it is dead; but unless you wish to say "a dozen" for his "half," not a line in the indictment need be changed for to-day.

Pure literature may provide cake; but not bread and butter.

Walter Harte tried to live by literature; he was driven to journalism; he died of it. Already I quoted some

of the things he said about the "literary brigandage" necessary in "the masked service of journalism." Not even Stevenson more terribly arraigned the modern newspaper than did "Some Masks and Faces" in "Meditations in Motley." Yet, half a dozen years after that, the finest book of American essays in our time, was printed, the author was dead. He who had written so splendidly of "Prejudice" found but one place where the sword of prejudice was not sharp against him: the grave.

Harte was of the study; his writings and his life were one struggle against the various little gods of our Grub Street. He was an analyst who, sitting in the shadows of seclusion, pricked the world's bubbles. His career was one combat against odds. It is true that he had, in the words of the worldly, often only himself to blame. Of all men he knew least of compromise, or of cutting his cloth. He refused to try success by way of sycophancy. Indeed, I have known him refuse to adapt himself even to friendship. That, perhaps, was one secret of his failure: he would not adapt himself. For, in the world's eye, he remains a failure; though the book he wrote is better than tons of best sellers.

A friend of his and mine, anxious to serve Harte, came to me once with a shrug. "The man's impossible," he said. "I asked him to do me a thousand words on anything he liked, and he sent me an article to fill two issues of my paper." Hypochondriac as he was, Harte took this sort of thing as but another of those blows of fate he was so used to. If he had been asked the reason for his action in the matter of the editor's order, he would have averred that he could treat no subject decently in less space than he had taken; to limit himself to the absurd exigencies of this or that paper was to tamper with the spirit of his art. That was the whole secret, in fine: he was a man meant only for books. In an age when books can often be written only by those who



keep the wolf away by journalism, there was no room for Walter Harte.

You have only to open "Meditations in Motley" anywhere to find the bookman, not the writer of marketable trifles. Once enamored of his subject, he needed room; like the Nilghai in "The Light that Failed" he took a mile to turn in. As result, however, we had from him essays profound, sincere, and as artistically composed as any of Montaigne's or Lamb's. In his book were no dainty vaultings into the subject over the "happy" quotation that would smack of the dilettante or the scholiast; no delicate titivations of the text, after the manner of a Miss Repplier; no summing up of the whole matter in the space of a few coruscant pages, to fill you with amaze at the author's cleverness, and to convince you—like Mr. Saltus—of nothing. He was ever serious; his essays had the ancient, Fleet Street manner; you might say, if you misliked him, that he had the Johnsonian heaviness of touch.

I wonder where, to-day, you will buy a copy of "Meditations in Motley"? The last letter I ever had from Harte told me the remnants of that edition, so abominably mishandled by the "Arena" of Boston, were in his garret, intended for burning up. Yet, as a real specimen in "belles lettres" that was one of perhaps half a dozen books America has had in twenty years!

Walter Harte was for years assistant editor of the New England Magazine, and much of his best writing lies buried in these files; it was in his department, "In a Corner at Dodsley's," that he printed his appreciation of Ambrose Bierce, which, for some years, was the only Eastern recognition accorded the author of "In the Midst of Life." From that magazine, he passed to the "Arena." Eventually he added a venture of his own to that pamphlet movement, among the younger men, which, occurring about 1895, was one of the rare signs of in-

tellectual revolution that America has seen in our time. The "Fly-leaf" was the name of this tiny monthly mouth-piece for his own artistic individuality. In the success of that venture Harte probably found the greatest happiness he knew.

The "Fly-leaf's" success aroused the envy of another pamphleteer. Elbert Hubbard eventually persuaded Harte to incorporate the "Fly-leaf" with his own pamphlet; Harte left Boston, and joined energies with Hubbard. The partnership was not happy; it lasted eighteen days. Its dissolution left the "Fly-leaf" dead.

He never really recovered from the destruction of his "Fly-leaf." He wrecked his health in the strain of newspaper reporting. If, in 1894, he had written to me that letter, from which on page . . . I have already quoted the passage beginning ". . . I am alive, . . ." you may imagine what it meant for him, after having reached individual independence, mental and material, to be plunged again into reportorial buccaneering. He fought against illness, and misfortune, and died, I fear, confirmed most bitterly in that sad philosophy of despair which even his brightest moments merely glossed.

He had not, perhaps, the talent for happiness. Easily enough it was to dismiss him as "a queer fellow." Even those who best understood him saw him but seldom, and it was never possible to be merry with him. His pale face, and the constant hint he gave of one whose spirit far outshone his body, made him not unlike the Hamlet whom we see played as a thin and pallid person. No; not a happy man, or one to make others happy. Yet wit and irony sparkle in his pages, and for an intelligent person there is as much entertainment in "Meditations in Motley" as in any volume of Montaigne. Seldom, in my time, has so promising a man of letters been so hardly used by fate.

His book was dedicated to the Devil and Dame Chance

“the two most potent deities in literary fortunes.” That bit of truth-telling was never forgiven him by either.

Students of literature have seen this type recur in every age. He preferred the gloom of the study to any social intercourse; when the world went wrong with him, he found a corner, and there—ended.

Had there been such a Home for Authors, such a man need not have died in need and want. I do not say that he would have been an easy person to induce to such seclusion; but, even if it had been necessary to shift his sick-bed bodily, there might have been something for him less sad than dying like a rat in a hole.

Into the question of the temperamental differences between the author and the actor, the qualities of sensitiveness and shame which, in the author, keep him from accepting what an actor might claim as his due, there is no need to go. Doubtless even the author who had been most commercial in his activities, might, with distress and infirmity laying hold on him, be a difficult person to lure into even the most ideally planned Home. Superintendence, management, of such an institution, would entail nothing less than genius. Into all this it would be futile to go; my argument is simply that there is no valid reason why, if for the lesser artist such provision be made, the greater should be without it. A very plain example of logic, and an excuse, in general, for comparing the public's attitudes towards the two arts in question.

Turning from the melancholy case of Walter Harte, we find even in the cheery pages of Stevenson an occasional hint of the poor sort of happiness that comes to the artist in letters. Here was a man whom a generation held the type of the pure artist, yet he said of himself that if it had not been for his health, “which made it impossible, I could not find it in my heart to forgive

myself that I did not stick to an honest, commonplace trade when I was young, which might have now supported me during these ill years." In gayer mood, to be sure, he admitted that writers were but Daughters of Pleasure, and made their bread by their enjoyment. Even to that he added: "But it is not all primroses, some of it is brambly, and most of it is uphill." Yet who had drunk deeper of the joy of art than Stevenson? Did he not die full of it?

As for the permanence of delight afforded by authors and actors there can be but slight compare. For the mummer who merely shows a changing set of masks, we may conceive admiration, but hardly much affection. For the man behind the book, on the other hand, the stir of gratitude should spring. Take out of the world what it owes to literature, and what a void is there? Take out what we owe to actors, and what is lost? The memory of this gesture, that grimace, or such a tone of the voice. The words, the kernel of that husk, would still be there. We still could take the page and let our fancy pose the dramatic gestures for ourselves. But take away the poetry, the essays, the tragedies, and the romance, of all the great deeps of letters, and how poor the world would be! The debt to authors is so vast, so infinite, that one can nowise compute it.

If to an author come the accident of ill luck, of poverty, of illness—what sign is there in all the world that anyone cares? The greater the privacy the artist kept, the less will any aid come to him in misfortune. While the vogue is on, while the papers kindle the flame of a brief renown, we may pretend an interest; the moment a new idol comes we seldom even ask "What has become of Yesterman?" and we really do not care what the answer is.

What, then, is so ridiculous about our doing for our authors what long ago was done for actors? This great

democracy has justly been accused of caring too little for the arts; such an institution as we have been dreaming of would go far to wipe out that stain. Though you could not drag into it with wild horses even the most miserable of all the writing wreckage—even if the place stood always empty; as a mere memorial, it would atone for much.

If you have gone beyond our city walls no farther than to the Sailors' Snug Harbor on Staten Island, you will see how easily the world may repay, in comfort, what has been given to it in vitality. If our bodies have often owed debts to the deep-sea sailor—now as we actually sailed abroad, now as we merely consumed the staple come from overseas—how much more have not our spirits owed to the author? Are there, then, no green spots in this vast land of ours where a patch of Nature's great garden of peace might not be set aside for such a purpose? Is it indeed so absurd? Though pride might bar the gates of such a place to many needing its shelter, yet the mere fact of its existence would count something.

If, at the end of all endeavor, there loomed such a haven of rest as Stevenson crossed the world to find, what present buffets of fate would not the man of letters gladly brave? Physical failure, to which Stevenson early accustomed himself, is not infrequently the writer's portion; the fashion of robustness and out-door life cannot include all men; and those who, like Stevenson, have wrought for themselves a mountain home to die in, can be counted in a breath. Stevenson once told Edmund Gosse that, if ever he had a garden, he should like it to be empty, just a space to walk and talk in, with no flowers to need a gardener nor fine lawns to be mown. Even so, for such Aged and Infirm Author as our speculation now plays with, there need be but a space to walk and talk in,—a space much occupied, perhaps by ghosts, yet redolent throughout of the gratitude of a sometime careless public.



Return again to material, rather than sentimental details. It is there that we find emphasised the blessings our world has for the mummer, as against the oblivion accorded him who gave the mummer words.

In that list of subscriptions for an Actors' Home, the first cheque came from a manager; the others from every branch in the theatre's employ, to say nothing of the millionaires whose spouses came from the stage.

To equal this, it would be necessary for an Authors' Home to have as its first founder a publisher. On what corner of Fifth Avenue shall we find him? Or where are the scores on scores of writing men, who, like the actors, can afford to sign gaily checks for three figures? For the publishers, in any event, there would be no decent excuse; they make, on the average, nine-tenths of all proceeds; theatrical managers rarely exact such large percentage. Often enough the publisher, having contracted to issue an edition of, say a thousand, binds up exactly enough to recoup himself, and a little more, for his outlay; after that, the author is amazed to find that the rest of the edition is left "in sheets,"—so much sheer waste. I could give you names of gentry who thrive on these methods. Can you imagine them subscribing to an Authors' Home? Only if they were reincarnated, and this time with a conscience.

Yet the thing is not impossible. If that prosperity in writer-land is not all a dream, there should be one or two successful prose-peddlers able to sign decent cheques. For such clubs as The Lambs, The Players, or The Strollers, are there not, in New York alone, The Lotos, The Grolier, The Salmagundi, and The Press? It would be the newspapers who could make or mar the project, just as they have made—or marred—the conditions such a Home might assuage. It is the newspapers who could remind the public that though many authors are, like Stevenson, "ordered South," he is the only one easy to cite as coming to his life's conclusion under his own roof and

fig-tree. We may prate as we please of the increase in average well-being; some there will always be, like Walter Harte, who would rather die than be mere purveyors in the market-place, or—forced to it, at last, lest dependents suffer—would die of that same commerce.

It is as easy to ridicule the whole fantastic scheme as to insist, perpetually, on the impossibility of bending the literary temperament to it. Authors are no more victims of "the artistic temperament" than actors or musicians. Verdi, we know, at a cost to himself of twenty thousand pounds or so, founded in Italy a Home for Musicians. Where, in logic, is the argument that shall deny our writers equal opportunities?

It rests—I cannot insist enough—with the newspapers. In their service innumerable good men have disappeared, used up, unheard of; it is the newspapers who exact, in return for such bread and butter as they furnish, so heavy a moral premium. As in literature, so in actual journalism; only the few reach great salaries, wide-reaching renown, or national importance; against those there are thousands who grind themselves to death, day and night, for a pittance. In few other occupations is more body and soul exhausted daily; each morrow asks new efforts; yesterday's accomplishments are, in the newspaper, as if they had never been. Bernard Shaw wrote whimsically once of his inability to face the degradation of "serving up the weekly paper of five years ago as a novelty" in form of a book; he saw it looming before him as a "laborer sees the workhouse"; and, eventually, he succumbed, his "Dramatic Opinions and Essays" being the result.

But it need not be a "workhouse" that our fantasy is building for the Aged and Infirm. Let but our newspapers do as much for the old age of writers, as for their youth and prime they have done ill—and possibly posterity could forgive them.

## CHAPTER SIX

IF in the preceding pages you have discovered anything of animosity toward mummers, you have mistaken logic for prejudice. I simply think no more highly of the average actor than of the average author. One need have no prejudice whatever; need only, like the abominably maligned Machiavelli, see things as they are rather than as they might be; and the average actor and his art will loom no higher—than I rated them. The average in that sort of human puppet does nothing that the phonograph or the kinoscope cannot do almost as well. In even his most effective activities there is hardly more intelligence than the parrot and the monkey display in their imitations.

Opinion upon the theatre is not simply an exercise of the imagination with me, as you will have learned from my connection with an Independent Theatre movement. But that alone might not have justified definite opinions about the intelligence of the mummer average. It is because I knew—as intimately as, I believe, it was possible—the one American mummer who towered far above the average that I maintain my title to discuss the genus.

The one undisputed genius the American theatre knew since Booth was Richard Mansfield.

Much as I had written, in other years, about the theatre, the men and women of the theatre had been my slightest concern. That when I came to know one player well, he should be the one great *homme de théâtre* of our time in America—that, once again, proves that some fortune in misfortune dwells.

This man, then, I saw something of in fairly intimate

private ways. For all of one season I was in his service. I saw him at rehearsals; where the newspapers painted him such a ruffian. We shared the same roof; we broke bread together. In his New York house, and "on the road," we foregathered. In his family relations, and his relations with his company of actors; in every public and private relation of his life, I have been with him. We quarreled, eventually, as did nearly all who dealt with him; about a play written for him we came to dissensions; but never—thank Conscience!—have I joined the army of petty souls who, while he lived or after he died, never tired of mallice and uncharitableness toward him.

Now—here is what allows of my allusion to the subject—even in the case of this great genius, the clearest-eyed observer could not decide how much was there of individuality, how much of imitation. Was that a soul? Or was it but a palimpsest?

Before we come to some effort at solution of that riddle, let me recall some memories of the man.

This is not the place to rehearse the story of his achievements; it is notorious enough that he loomed head and shoulders above all the rest of America's players, for which they cordially hated him. He was, no doubt, the most hated man of his time. The truth was, he was too clever for them; he expected of his actors the one thing they lack: intelligence. When their lack showed too barely, he spoke his mind about it—a scintillant, searing mind. Yet he did much for his profession; he constantly rehearsed new plays, employed innumerable actors. Even towards authors he stands mountains higher than that fine old fossil, Joseph Jefferson, who spent on royalties to live playwrights that fine old sum, a zero. Mansfield did not disgorge his royalties easily; but at least he incurred them easily.

Knowing that trait of his, Miss Mary Stone and I insisted on having a written contract from him before

we delivered the full MS. of the dramatic version of that saccharine story, "The First Violin"—though it was already in rehearsal; and when he refused, and called the play his property, we kept our play, saying he might have what other person he liked do a version, but ours he could not have. He did; and there was some money made; but, though we had thought it impossible to write a worse play than ours, that other person succeeded in producing much greater nonsense than ours. However, my point is this: because of a difference of financial opinion with Mansfield, I never saw why I should suddenly declare he was no genius.

If he had not been a genius he might have been more popular.

Even at this slight remove of time it is hard to imagine the amazing version of the man which the newspapers promulgated, and the public liked to consider authentic. A volume could be filled with anecdotes about him; most of them malicious. Few have written of how brilliant a gentleman he could be; how he could talk all things to all men; how varied was his learning, and how fascinatingly he could express it. In short, besides being an actor, he was a gentleman and a scholar, and his inferiors forgave him neither. I recall a dinner at his table; of the three that sat over the wine afterwards I am the sole survivor, for Paul Leicester Ford was the other guest.

One secret of their hating him, I think, was this: he never veiled his disregard for his mental inferiors. There, doubtless, he lacked being the true gentleman. His intellectual arrogance made him impatient of stupidity. But he knew vastly well with whom to "try on" his ironic speeches, and with whom not to.

The public's opinion of him did sometimes weigh on him. Let me quote to you, here, from a letter he wrote to me in October, 1896, which has never been made public before:



"Behold me in future playing only good men and lovers and loveable creatures, like that dear amiable, open-hearted, open-handed, joy-distributing Jefferson, or the merry, bouncing, rollicking Sol Smith Russell, or that extravagant gay young dog Francis Wilson, or that panacea for all ills Crane, or that beau-ideal of all romantic covers Drew, or the impetuous, tempestuous Sothern—yes, I have three plays ready to follow "Sombras"—and they are all bright, cheerful themes, and in two I am the lover! We have had the new woman—now I will give the world—the new lover! Announce it! . . .

Yours always,

"RICHARD MANSFIELD."

Even the newspapers, when this man died, admitted that he was "the greatest actor of his hour, and one of the greatest of all times." And him, for my too slight deserts, it was given me to know—and not to know the others; and in that particular, as in my having had Ambrose Bierce as friend, and not the others, I have had so much fortune that there is no excuse for repining.

My association with Mansfield gave me that chance to search for the mumming soul which enables me now to write of it not too vaguely. What that search resulted in I set down, but slightly embellished, in a far too brilliant satire called "The Imitator." Since you are sure never to have read that book, let me here make from its caricature of the mumming temperaments such extracts as will serve the present purpose:

Arthur Wantage . . . had not yet, that season, delivered himself of a curtain speech. His curtain speeches were wont to be insults delivered in an elaborately honeyed manner; he took the pose of considering his audiences with contempt; he admired himself far more for his condescension in playing to them than he respected his audiences for having the taste to admire him. . . . The secret of his hatred for O'Deigh was the secret of his hatred for all dramatists.

He was a curious compound of egoism, childishness and shrewdness. Part of his shrewdness—or was it his childishness?—showed in his aversion to paying authors' royalties. He always tried to re-write all the plays he accepted. . . . When he could find no writers willing to make him a present of plays, for the sake, as he put it, of having it done by as eminent an actor as himself, and in so beautiful a theatre, he was in the habit of announcing that he would forsake the theatre, and turn critic. . . .

The riddle of Arthur Wantage's character had never yet been read. There were those who averred he was never doing anything but acting, not in the most intimate moments of his life; some called him a keen money-maker, retaining the mummer's pose off the stage for the mere effect of it on press and public. What the man's really honest, unrehearsed thoughts were,—or if he ever had such—no man could say. . . . This man who came out before the curtain now as this, now as that, character of fancy or history, what shred of vital, individual personality had he retained through all these changings? . . . The vanity, the egoism of this player were so obvious, so transparent, so blatant. Vane wondered, more than ever, what was under that mask of arrogance and conceit. The perfect frankness of it made it almost admirable. . . .

"Actors" (said Wantage) "are sheep, simply sheep. The papers say I am a brute at rehearsals. My dear Vane, I swear to you that if Nero were in my place he would massacre all the minor actors in the land. And they expect the salaries of intelligent persons!"

Vane, listening, wondered why Wantage, under such an avalanche of irritations, continued such life. Gradually it dawned on him that all this fume and fret was merely part of the man's mummery; it was his appeal to the sympathy of his audience; his argument against the reputation his occasional exhibitions of rage and waywardness had given him.

Vane's desire to penetrate the surface of this conscious imitator, this fellow who slipped off this character to assume that, grew keener and keener. Where, under all this crust of alien form and action, was the individual, human, thought and feeling? Or was there any left? Had the con-

stant corrosion of simulated emotions burnt out all the original character of the mind?

And here, finally, was the curtain-speech indulged in:

When he finally condescended to stride before the curtain again, it was with a lift of the eyebrows, a little gesture, an air that said, quite plainly: Really, it is very annoying of you. If I were not very gracious indeed I should refuse to come out again. I do so, I assure you, under protest. He gave a little, delicate cough, he lifted his eyes. At that the house became still, utterly still. He began without any vocative at all.

"The actor," he said, "who wins the applause of so distinguished a company is exceedingly fortunate. The applause of such a very distinguished company"—he succeeded in emphasising his phrase to the point where it became a subtle insult—"is very sweet to the actor. It reconciles him to what he must take to be a breach of true art, the introduction of his own person on the scene where he has appeared as an impersonator of character. Some actors are expected to make speeches after their exertions should be over. I am one of those poor actors. In the name of myself, a poor actor, and the poor actors in my company, I must thank this distinguished body of ladies and gentlemen for the patience with which they have listened to Mr. O'Deigh's little trifle. It is, of course, merely a trifle, *pour passer le temps*. Next season, I hope, I may give you a really serious production. Mr. O'Deigh cables me that he is happy such distinguished persons in such a critical town have applauded his little effort. I am sure ever so many of you would rather be at home than listening to the apologies of a poor actor. For I feel I must apologise for presenting so inconsiderable a trifle. A mere summer night's amusement. I have played it as a sort of rest for myself, as preparation for larger productions. If I have amused you, I am pleased. The actor's province is to please. The poor actor thanks you."

Now that is but very little enlarged and embroidered on the actual curtain speech made by Mansfield when

Shaw's "The Devil's Disciple" was given in the old Fifth Avenue Theatre in New York.

The riddle, however, of this manysided genius was unsolved in "The Imitator," nor was it ever soluble. What heaven and what hell was in that various character no other human being might say. There was as much gentleness and kindness as there was bitterness and sarcasm, as much charity and good humor as there was peevishness. Much of his ill humor came, I am sure, from ill health, from physical discomforts. The smallest things disturbed his temper. I recall an instance of that which, since the point is against myself, may be of interest here.

Employing my pen as I was, for Mansfield, it was not to be expected that I could escape the commission to write a play on Dean Swift. Every writing man who ever had speech with Mansfield,—from Charles Henry Meltzer to Clyde Fitch—must, I am sure, at one time or another, have been committed to that dreadful effort. Just as the most populous club in New York could be formed of ex-editors of the *Cosmopolitan Magazine*, so have some of us thought seriously of founding a club for those approached by Mansfield on the Dean Swift detail. It was the satire in Swift's character that fascinated the actor. To any experienced eye, it was, of course, as impossible to get drama out of that career as out of the Pentateuch. But I was too young to have that detail daunt me; and none of the "Dean Swift Club"—members warned me. So I slaved and sweated, and appeared, presently, with a completed act.

It was at the clubhouse of the American Yacht Club, then stationed at Milton Point, Rye. The dinner promised beautifully, but—it was not to be. We had, alas, a stupid waiter! He was clumsy, and he was tactless. Before we were at the third course, Mansfield's temper was in shreds. I knew the storm signals; I knew I was

doomed; but I went through with it. We settled ourselves into rocking-chairs. Mansfield smoked and looked gloomily at the Sound. Never, all the time that I read, did he cease glaring gloomily at the Sound. I unrolled the impossible drama of Swift and Stella. And when it was over, I waited. It seemed a long wait; but finally Mansfield spoke—and actually smiled as he spoke.

“Send it, my boy,” he said, “to Harper’s!”

And yet, who knows—if he had not quarreled with that waiter . . .

I have tried to indicate that this great man of the theatre was one of the best hated men of his time, and most heartily hated by his own profession. But nothing that has ever been said or printed on that point is so horrid an indictment of that average actor whom I began this chapter by professing my aversion to, as was that last chapter in Richard Mansfield’s career, his funeral.

Mansfield died the morning of August 30th, 1907, in New London. He was buried the following Monday, in the private God’s Acre which was part of that lovely estate he had become possessed of. New London is a matter of three hours from New York, and two from Boston. They were to make one again with nature that great player who for years had given employment to more people of the theatre than any single other actor in America. You would have thought, would you not, that, if no great press of players, at least a representative handful of the best of them would have made it a point to be there? I, at least,—though we had quarreled; we had thought none the less of each other—was glad to go to the last scene in which this great man was to figure on this side the grave. To have known him was an honor; if I might attend the funeral, it was I who was benefited; that was the way it seemed to me.

It was a dismal day of rain. The train that took me east was not full of actors; it was easy enough to see



that. "Full of actors!" Will you believe me if I tell you just how many actors were at Mansfield's funeral?

*Exactly one actor!*

Incredible, you say? But most damnably true. We who followed him were the friends he had made, in his private, social life in New London; the immediate business *entourage* that had been his when he fell ill; *one actor*, and my poor self!

Oh, yes; they had done the cheap and easy things; they had telephoned to the florist, and they had written messages, or even telegraphed them. But all that body of his fellows, those actors, some of whom he had kept in bread and meat, and all of whom he had outranked—where were they? Sitting smugly, somewhere, out of the wet, and cursing his memory.

Never was there a more damning criticism of the mummifying mind than that. The actors themselves more permanently wrote themselves down, in that action, than have any of the writers who proved them vagabonds. If they owed Mansfield, the individual player, nothing, they owed to what he represented—to the genius of their art—every possible reverence they could show. It was not simply the man they buried there that day above the Thames and Long Island Sound; it was the art of acting's finest embodiment our time had known.

No; do not expect me to like these fellows, or the newspapers who, gathering subscriptions for their old age, deny an equal right to the more real art of letters.

An irritable and jealous species, too, no doubt, the breed of writing-men; but—not as utter graceless curs as those who stayed away from Mansfield's funeral.

Chicago churches never appealed to me; but rarely have I seen a larger crew of reverent writing men than gathered in one of them when Eugene Field was buried.

Between those two funerals—Richard Mansfield's and

Eugene Field's—I find all the argument I need confirming me in my opinion of the average actor.

These excursions into the domain of the theatre are not so irrelevant as they may have seemed. They extend our view of the critical field, on which the Man of Letters and the *homme de théâtre* so often meet. The same toadying element in American criticism which elevated the “best seller” at the expense of a Bierce, curried favor with the average player and playgoer to the neglect of the playwright. The same newspaper which overflows with gossip about mummers prints no more criticism of letters than the publishers distribute in their “slips.” What has brought the one art, in fact—if you are to call acting an art—to its present state of only commercial eminence, has brought the other still lower.

The lack of critics is what has undone us.

Whom—to repeat my question—shall we compare with Oscar Wilde, Bernard Shaw, or George Moore? Name me an American in that rank!

It is that trio which has specially interested me; let us consider them in turn. Each of these three Irishmen touched, in his time, the theatre as well as literature; so that from our comparison between player and writer we come to these commanding critical figures easily enough.

The greatest man of letters of the three, the man who best proclaimed “the critic as artist,” was Oscar Wilde.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

PARADOX is never so absolutely king as when you try to determine the separate ways of life and of literature. The poet lives his life, you say, and that is one matter; the poem lives its life, and that is quite another. Between the writer and his writings the discriminating must observe divorce. . . . Then, directly contradicting, is the theory of the goodly who are touched with the Puritan taint. Every written line, these hold, is the intimate expression of self. The sinner cannot write other than sinful thing. Only the ploughman should write of the plough. . . .

The farther you fare, if you would reach dogma on this point, the deeper will you mire. Paradox alone rules.

And rules nowhere so supremely as in the case of Oscar Wilde. If, on the one hand, we plead that it is the man's literature, not his life, that posterity should cherish; on the other, it is folly to forget how completely, in Wilde, the artist chose life as well as letters for expressing his self. "Life itself is an art, and has its modes of style no less than the arts that seek to express it," wrote Wilde in his essay on Wainewright—marvellous in itself, and more so for the tragic thaumaturgy by which Time made of it a prophecy of Wilde's own fate!—and Charles Whibley, later, echoed with "there is an art of life, as there are arts of colour, form and speech."

If we incline to consider Wilde as the artist in life, if we recall his career as æsthete, as triumphant dandy, as successful playwright, we have also to remember the tragedy, the prison, the dismal, horrid crumbling to a sordid death. Inextricably mingled were his living and

his writing; to consider his prose, his plays, his poetry, only by the light of his prison and its aftermath, were as stupid as to imagine that one can ever read a page of his without finding there some echo of his personality. No man whose energy and delight in a personal prose, and whose paradoxical yet sincere infatuation with art could make such impress on the time and land he lived in, can be erased, by any act of his own, or by our volition, from the world's chronicle. If his triumphs were gorgeous; if he turned the fogs of London into rose-gardens for his fancy; if in vanity and impertinence he ruled his world as a monarch, dictating taste and thought and language, he was to sound, later, the depths of despair and pain; his soul, once so arrogant in its scorn of human emotion, was to suffer sorrow, and shame and contempt. The mood of the triumphant dandy we have in his earlier, that of the self-pitying sufferer in his later, writings. He was always, in life as in letters, the man of his mood, the "artist in attitudes."

Macaulay, writing of Byron, said: "We know of no spectacle so ridiculous as the British public in one of its periodical fits of morality. In general, elopements, divorces, and family quarrels, pass with little notice. But once in six or seven years our virtue becomes outrageous. . . ." After an almost literal account of what years afterwards took place about Wilde, Macaulay concluded that passage: "At length our anger is satiated. Our victim is ruined and heart-broken. And our virtue goes quietly to sleep for seven years more."

A month after Wilde's death I published an argument seeking to disestablish the connection between his noble artistic achievements and the cloud under which his name still lay. It was foolhardy, said the cautious, thus to fly in the face of respectability; it was vain to prophesy that Time could ever restore this man's work in the general appreciation.

To-day, not ten years later, it is amusing to recall that argument of mine, its reception, and its eventual vindication.

Let me give you a notion of that argument, printed first in January, 1901:

"It shall be the first thing I do in the next world," he avowed once, so such of us as have proper faith in promises mortal or immortal, may conceive Oscar Wilde at work upon translating Flaubert's "Tentations" into English. For his career in this world is closed by the great Veto of Death, as once before the man had closed it by his own folly. . . .

No sane judgment can blink the conclusion that in both poetry and prose, in play, in story and in essay, Oscar Wilde proved himself one of the most brilliant of those using the English language in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. We have only to recall Poe, Byron, Shelley and Verlaine to remember that great talent is not infrequently companion to grave faults. Some of his work may seem sicklied over with the taint of his baser self. "Salome," "The Picture of Dorian Gray" and "The Sphinx" suffer from being construed too much in the shadow of his personal scandal. What, on the other hand, could be more exquisite than "The Happy Prince and Other Tales," "The House of Pomegranates," the "Poems," or more witty than the critical essays in "Intentions"? To deny the power of this man's writings, now when he is dust, and when his baser part may well have oblivion as its share, is to commit the folly of the British Museum when it withdrew the books it once, for their intrinsic merits, had housed; and to surpass in cowardice those managers who stopped the successful runs of Wilde's plays.

Aside from the succession of tragedies that closed the public career of Oscar Wilde, the impress made by the man was certainly as much a part of the history of the



manners of the nineteenth century in its decadence, as his writings were a part of its literature. Of all the many who displayed their personalities, and their talents, to the illumination and amusement of that century, he was the last whom it would be proper to consider only a name behind a pen. Gifted as he was, he had the additional shrewdness to see that the public must be fooled first and asked to appreciate afterwards; he played the fool, therefore, to the result that his fame, if a curious one, became international. His career as an esthete, as a leader of an entire artistic movement in England, is matter of history. His influence was both direct and indirect. Directly, he did away with a deal of the hard woodenness then characterising the interiors of English houses; indirectly, he gave the world Du Maurier's cartoons in *Punch*, and the famous Gilbert & Sullivan operetta of "Patience." Mr. Max Beerbohm has given us a charming picture of the England of 1880, in which he bade us fancy Wilde trotting Beauty about through England; that, indeed, was just what he did. Exaggeration attended him, of course; fashions, if you spell them fads, invariably exhaust their foolish possibilities first. It was the same in the case of the black-and-white work of Aubrey Beardsley; the morbid, uncanny qualities in his work made him offensive to the majority, yet the power and freshness of his talent were indisputable. He was a discovery of Wilde's; it was to the older man's patronage that the younger owed the beginnings of his meteoric, brief career.

One may conceive that in Wilde a perverse sense of loyalty to art kept him from ever displaying the real depths below his obvious insincerities; he had begun by being a public fool; he had succeeded in establishing that as a reputation for himself, and the rumor of his paradoxical brilliance was too secure and too amusing for him to risk shattering it with glimpses of a more serious self. Yet who can read his sonnet "Helas!" appearing in the

1881 edition of his "Poems," without feeling that under the glitter and the pose there was something else, something the gay world of London knew nothing of? Publicly, Wilde posed as a Soul only in the spirit in which that word was then, in the 'Eighties, used in English society, as opposed to the Smart; he pretended nothing about him was genuine; he passed for a symbol of his own clever defense of liars; yet in "Helas!" the soul gave its cry.

Wilde's position in English society, in letters and the theatre, was remarkable and enviable. The surface brilliance of his first comedy, "Lady Windermere's Fan," was followed by "An Ideal Husband," "The Importance of Being Earnest" and others. England, America and Australia applauded these flashing dialogues, as they had smiled at his estheticism. Hardly any other figure had been as much a target for satire and caricature. His American lecture tour brought him the clamorous criticism he hoped for; his esthetic leadership, in its early stages, effected *Bunthorne* and *Posthuma*, and, some years afterwards, following his appearance before a theatre curtain with a cigarette in his fingers and a green carnation on his coat, led to the picture drawn in "The Green Carnation." Here, again, we may give him credit for serving as an artistic influence; it was through "The Green Carnation" that Mr. Robert Hichens, until then active chiefly as a musical critic, first took to fiction.

About such a man there has, naturally, accumulated a mass of anecdotic matter. Of one whom Edgar Saltus declared the best conversationist in England this was but natural.

There was the story of the male kitten which Wilde, in friendly days, gave Whistler. The two fell out; time passed. One day Mrs. Whistler comes to her husband in amaze. "What do you think," she said, "Oscar has kittens." "Impossible!" says the astonished artist.

"Come and see!" They view the litter together, and nothing is said for a moment or so. Then, at last, Whistler finds his solution. "Well," he declares, "they must be plagiarised."

Immortal is that retort of Whistler's when Wilde had sighed, after a witticism of the other's, "Ah, how I wish I had said that!" "Never mind," ran the retort, "you will!"

Characteristic, too, was that about the tax-collector who, after much vain pursuit, finally came on Wilde issuing from his Tite Street house. Wilde refused payment, declaring that, if he owed any taxes, which he considered improbable and absurd, he certainly did not owe them in that district, for he did not live there. "But this is your house," said the collector, "you occupy it; I've just seen you coming out. You must live here."

"Most positively I do not."

"At any rate," retorted the now desperate man, "you do what legally constitutes living in the house. You sleep there. You won't deny that?"

"But, my dear man," was the answer, with a languid stifling of a yawn, "you must consider: I sleep so badly!"

And, finally, there is that pathetic story of Wilde's last illness. Being told that the only thing that might help him was an extremely expensive operation, he sighed:

"Then I must die beyond my means."

Whether these were authentic or not, their circulation proved his prominence. If a retort, or an anecdote, was witty enough to be exceptional, his period fathered it on Wilde.

. . . The culminating fascination in all that Wilde wrote, by virtue of his career's closing, was in his essay on Thomas Griffiths Wainewright. Never in all the world was a more uncanny bit of appreciation written. In every line of this essay on "Pen, Pencil and Poison" one

reads, now that Wilde is no more, the phrases pointing to Wilde's own career. It is as if he had, years before the event, given us a document that should serve in sort as an apology. The parallel is close to the point of gruesomeness. There is no argument that an intending pleader for Wilde's writings could use that Wilde had not himself used, years before his own disgrace, for Wainewright, the man who was artist, poet, dilettante, forger and poisoner. Wainewright, too, startled London as a dandy. . . . Can one read, without some emotion, Wilde's passage touching Wainewright? "The sentence now passed on him was, to a man of his culture, a form of death. . . . The permanence of personality is a very subtle metaphysical problem, and certainly the English law solves the question in an extremely rough-and-ready manner. . . . His crimes seem to have had an important effect upon his art. They gave a strong personality to his style. . . . The fact of a man being a poisoner is nothing against his prose. The domestic virtues are not the true basis of art. . . . There is no essential incongruity between crime and culture."

It is the poetry, the prose, the plays that remain with us; the things he wrote, and the things his personality caused to be written; all are voices of their special time; all memorable items in the chronicle of two or three decades. Nothing of the black shadow that ousted him from the world, that made him as one dead even before death, should creep over his writings and his achievements for art and culture.

We read De Maupassant, and his scarlet sins and black butterflies no longer concern us; a verse or so of Verlaine's will outlive that of the most stainless curate who ever was horrified at thought of absinthe; D'Annunzio and Mendés sin quite as fluently, according to the puritans, as they write. Millions have lived righteously without leaving for posterity anything so fine as "The Ballad of Reading Gaol." One has only to read that splen-

did poem, one of the very strongest written in English in the last twenty-five years, to realise what a hideous punishment followed the man's downfall.

Each word he wrote of Wainewright had intenser application to himself. He might even have been happier if he, like Wainewright, had died in prison. Death found him with all his sins upon him, huddled, so to speak, with the memories and survivals of a splendid career, a ghastly disaster. No death in all history seems more horrid than this one. Beau Brummel in Calais, Verlaine in Paris, do not approach this, since poverty and loneliness do not combine to equal that other dreadful Fate that grinned beside the bedside of this once brilliant Irishman. One may fancy the beautiful cruel, yet pitiful wanton, Paris, whispering by that bed:

“For none can tell to what red Hell  
His sightless soul may stray.”

The sunflowers, the lilies and the velvet are gone, yet the satire and the caricature they aroused remain part of our literature and our art. The tinsel of estheticism is dust, yet the period of its reign was as real as this to-day is, and we ourselves are heirs in gaining knowledge of the Japanese arts. The drawings of Du Maurier and Beardsley, the writings of Hichens, the words and music of Gilbert & Sullivan—and an entire school of German minstrels—testify obliquely to the power of the man whose Hell, more literally than that of any other man, was indeed paved with Intentions. . . .

Thus far I wrote in January, 1901.

What was sketched in the heat of emotion, Time more than vindicated. A year later “The Importance of Being Earnest” was again played in St. James’s Theatre, London. Everywhere the calmer perspective of time led to increase rather than fading in regard for his writings.



Australia and America saw his plays again. In 1903, out of half a dozen plays from the English presented in European continental centres, in Buda-Pesth, Munich and Paris, Wilde's play "Salome" was the bill in the majority of cases.

As the years went on, no exotic influence upon the continental literature of Europe, as it concerned itself with formal art, was more noticeable than that of Oscar Wilde. Strolling in the rare sunshine that visited Berlin in the spring of 1905, I was everywhere struck by that. Chance finally, I recall, took me into a quaint little bookshop facing what was once the workshop of Joseph Joachim. There I found a little book, giving, from French and German sources, intimate glimpses of Wilde's later years, after his issue from prison; I translated it, and it was published under the title of "Recollections." In my Introduction I pointed to the dominance of outside influence on the German theatre; that farces from the French, dismal stuff from Scandinavia, and comedies by Barrie and Shaw were taking turn with Hauptmann, Sudermann, Max Halbe, Hartleben and Schnitzler. But the piece played oftenest on both sides of the Rhine was "Salome." And when you went beyond the theatre, to the windows of the bookshops, you saw "De Profundis" paraded as the book of the season, and a very deluge of literature about its author. What was newest in that I seized, and, as I said, translated.

Certainly only once before had so strong an exotic influence come on European letters, and that was when Baudelaire gave Poe to France. Aside from the spread of Wilde's writings themselves throughout Europe, I found much interest in the whole modernisation of German letters. The movement typified in England by the "Yellow Book," in America by the "Lark," the "Chapbook," and the other items in the so-called "pamphlet movement," had its German equivalent. Upon a number

of the younger German writers in prose and verse, for print and playhouse, the Irishman's influence seemed discoverable. The thought-mode of such men as Frank Wedekind, Otto Bierbaum, Richard Dehmel, Ernst Von Wolzogen and E. R. Weiss had its relationship to the art of Wilde. One need not say the impetus for that school came from the author of "Salome" and "Intentions," but at least it ran parallel with his. Indeed, we might easily go so far as to connect with him that extraordinary and interesting movement which some years ago attempted to give the German music-hall the dignity of actual art. That Ueberbrett! movement, dissolving, evaporated into what was later the "cabaret made in Germany." But to that I must devote a special chapter.

Our immediate concern is with the literature about Wilde which Europe offered on every hand in 1905. One of the most vivid pictures shown was that, by Andre Gide, of Wilde just before the closing of his public career. He met him in Biskra, in 1895, for the first time in three years, and the Frenchman's account of the subsequent interviews, whether authentic or not, were fascinating to a degree.

Just as Pierre Loti once wrote of Pity and of Death, so might Wilde's "De Profundis" be called Wilde's book of Pity and of Life. As that book hinted the tragedy of prison life, especially the soul's tragedy, so did the little volume of "Recollections" present glimpses of his life after prison. The few had perforce to read "De Profundis" in the light of knowledge that its author, after all the resolutions and conclusions of that document, reverted to his baser self, and died with his life fallen far below the altitude marked in the prison letters. On some points the chapters by M. Gide and by Ernest La Jeunesse were in conflict; as in the matter of the number following Wilde's body to the grave; but neither in the Ross "Life" nor in the so-called Complete Edition issued

in 1907 have I found those details more accurately declared.

A year later, in the spring of 1906, Wilde's European vogue was still spreading. In Berlin "An Ideal Husband" was on the boards of the Das Kleine Theater; Vienna was issuing a Complete Edition in German; Leonardo was pointing out, in Florence, Italian interest; and in Madrid fascinating glimpses of "Salome's" author had been given by Gomez Carillo. Inasmuch as the play in question was first offered to London only in 1906—and if we believe Mr. Max Beerbohm, refused as too serious!—Carillo's glimpses retain their interest; the more so since the Strauss opera has become the medium for so much notoriety.

"In those days," Carillo wrote, "Wilde's thoughts were busied only with the lustful dance of Salome. 'You are from Madrid?' And, after a pause, 'If for no other reason, I have always longed to go to Spain that I might see in the Prado Titian's Salome, of which Tintoretto once exclaimed: 'Here at last is a man who paints the very quivering flesh!' . . . No day went by without his talking to me of Salome. Now it was a passing woman who started him dreaming of the Hebraic princess; again he stood for hours before the jewelers' windows building for himself the ideal combination of gems with which to festoon the body of his idol. One evening he asked me suddenly, in the middle of the street, 'Don't you think she is better entirely naked?' He was thinking of Salome. 'Yes,' he went on, 'absolutely naked. But strewn with jewels, all ringing and tinkling in her hair, on her ankles, her wrists, her throat, enclosing her hips and heightening with their myriad glittering reflections the unchastity of that unchaste amber flesh. For of an unknowing Salome, who is a mere tool, I refuse to hear a word; no, no, Salome knows. . . .' Another time his Salome was all chastity. I recall an evening when Wilde came from the Louvre, and began to speak to me of a gentle princess who danced before Herod as if by a call from Heaven, that she

might finally be able to demand punishment on the lying enemy of Jehovah. 'Her quivering body,' he said, 'is tall and pale as a lily, nothing sexual is in her beauty. Veils woven by angels conceal her slenderness, her blond hair flows like molten gold over her shoulders. . . .' Once we were at Jean Lorrain's. Before a picture of the beheaded woman, a very pale head, Wilde exclaimed, 'Why, that is Salome!' And at once he imagined a princess who brings her lover the head of John, and then immediately sends her own head also, because she fancies herself despised by the young man. 'It is exactly like that,' he whispered. 'A Nubian gospel discovered by Boissiere tells of a young philosopher, to whom a Jewish princess makes a present of an apostle's head. The youth says to her smilingly, 'What I had rather have is your own head, sweetheart.' On that she goes away, pale, and that evening a slave brings the young philosopher on a golden plate the poor little head of his sweetheart. The scholar says, 'Why all this blood?' and goes on reading Plato. . . . 'Don't you think that is Salome?' . . . 'Write that!' said someone. Wilde actually began a story with the title, 'The Double Beheading.' He soon tore the sheets up, and thought of a poem. That, too, he relinquished, and chose drama. . . . Only Gustave Moreau's portrait unveiled for him the soul of his dreams. Many a time he simply repeated Huysman's words, 'She is nearly naked. In the whirl of the dance the veils are unloosed, the shawls are fallen to the ground, and only jewels clothe her body. The tiniest of girdles spans her hips; between her breasts a jewel glitters like a star. . . .' Five years later, in prison, in hours of sleeplessness, of fever and hunger, he mechanically repeated to himself the words: 'Between her breasts a jewel glitters like a star.'"

Recalling Wilde's preoccupation with his "Salome," and the painted versions of her, I have always wondered what he would have said to one exposed by the Secessionists in Berlin the summer of 1905. In the main that was a horrid lot of woolwork one found there, in rooms which in their time had shown the best of Manet, Monet, and Rodin. Only two men succeeded in counteracting the dreadful purples and greens prevailing; these were

Franz Stuck, the veteran, and Gustav Klimt, who, to the foreign observer at least, was new.

Here was the "Sphinx" again; with her hard cruel breasts, cold lowering face, promising voluptuousness, and ensuring destruction; a modern masterpiece in fleshly allegory. Beside it was a new Stuck canvas, a "Fight for the Female." Two crouching combatants, hairy, barbaric males; their eyes glittered brutally; their naked hands curled as claws; the very hair of their beards and naked bodies bristling with rage and lust. Beside them, disdainful, at once the prize and the princess, stood the woman, tawny, sombre, cruel, the same woman of his "Sphinx," repelling yet attractive, like a dark, alluring vice. One was reminded of Felicien Rops; for the exquisitely sharpened wit of the Belgian, we had here the hard animality of the Teuton. Wilde, I think, would have found that painting interesting. Still more, would he have lingered before the work of Gustav Klimt.

A new man, this, by international standards. A curious craft, his. His heights, his depths, displayed in one full room. Women, nothing but women. His method, if you must have comparison, compound of Mucha and of Botticelli. You recall the golden panels which Alphonse Mucha wasted on the world's walls some years ago in advertisement of Bernhardt's play "Gismonda"? In much that fashion were wrought the best of those decorative canvases; there was much gold and mosaic color in the background, much tenuous vapor in the figures themselves. A transparency and vagueness as if a girl by Rossetti were seen through the translucent glass of a bowl by Alexander. Slim gilt souls shining through slim gilt bodies. In one canvas at least a definite dream showed clearly; this showed Judith. The triumphant Jewess, brilliantly vivified, with lids half shut, the upper lip lifted to disdain and to triumph, had in her hand the head of Holofernes. Through his vapors, his gilt, his decorative mosaic, his flowing lines of supple limbs, the artist, in that one canvas, evoked a real soul.



You could not see it without wondering what Wilde would have said of it.

Speculation aside, there is still much, of actual historic and literary interest, to be told of "Salome."

Especially the episode of the Salomania regnant in New York in January, 1907.

That episode overflowed with immediate and comparative interest. When the second edition of my translated "Recollections" was issued at the close of 1906, it was made the target for much criticism directed against the inadvisability of further stirring unsavory embers. Foremost in this was the *New York Sun*. Lest you imagine that the case presently to be cited is exceptional, let me remind you of the criticism that journal vented on Grover Cleveland in his lifetime, and of the appreciations printed after his death, to say nothing of the list of subscribers to a Cleveland Memorial including the name of W. M. Laffan. If newspaper reading memories were not so short, how much more laughter there would be in our world! Moreover, if superstition did not die so hard in the majority, how little the legend of this or that journal's surpassing wit would stand examination! Wit that is careless of truth has always been one of the easiest things in the world.

Here is what the *Sun* said on December 29, 1906, about those translated "Recollections":

Mr. Pollard himself is flamboyant in his delight that Wilde is popular in Germany and that he influences a neurasthenic school of young writers.

On the same date the Boston *Transcript* said:

Mr. Pollard naturally calls attention to the growing world-wide vogue and appre-

ciation of Oscar Wilde. . . . Mr. Pollard might have added that the curiosity is as intense in America as in Europe, that his plays and books are constantly before the public, and that the man himself is more frequently discussed in print and in conversation than any other writer of his epoch.

You will note, if you do no more than read that Boston comment, that I had been reserved rather than "flamboyant." I knew some of those merry men of Park Row; never since the *Criterion Independent Theatre* had they missed an opportunity; and they never needed facts in their business of manufacturing opinion. Knowing this, I had been specially careful to recite only facts in my account of Wilde's European vogue. Several years in succession I had reported the spread of that vogue. Just a year before the "Salome" episode at the Metropolitan Opera House, I had stated that the one poignant note of European art that season had been the dancing, the dance of the Seven Veils in "Salome," of the courtesans in "Aphrodite," of the pseudo-Spaniards and Gauls in the Maxixe, of sleep-dancers like Mlle. Madeleine, and interpreters of historic legends like Isadora Duncan.

Small wonder, then, that when New York went temporarily mad on "Salome" in 1907, it made me smile; and when the wave of dancing overflowed us a year later, I should again experience the irony of being beforehand!

In December, 1905, Richard Strauss's opera, using the Wilde drama as libretto, was given in Dresden; thence it spread about the continent. December, 1906, found it being prepared for the American public by way of the musical headquarters, the Metropolitan Opera House, an enterprise in which were paramount some of the same millionaires who control a section of the metropolitan press. The moment "Salome" became part of the paramount operatic enterprise, the printed publicity accorded the story of this music-drama surpassed anything ever attempted by those who, in times when it was the mark of dangerous eccentricity rather than of being in the fashion, had insisted on the worth of Wilde's work. One evening paper printed "Salome" complete in an issue; and for ten days it was impossible to pick up a newspaper that did not devote anticipatory eulogy to the Irishman's *macabre* version of a gospel legend.

It was nothing less than Salomania. Those whose faith had nothing to do with the curiosity-stimulating impetus of a popular vogue, deplored the extent to which the newspapers were overdoing things. Such heights of enthusiasm as the New York newspapers reached both before and after the performance of the Strauss version had not been reached elsewhere. Note this, from the columns of the same paper which had sneered, within the month, at another's "flamboyant delight":

If to-day the genius of Oscar Wilde, many years dead but not transfigured, can so touch with the vital spark of dramatic power the master musician of the world in our time, let the frogs croak as they will . . . these slings can harm none but the mud-throwers themselves. What man's "Salome" does the public want, if not Wilde's creature of the "vile, virginal face" who may—indeed, who must—have been such a beast as did actually in history demand the head of John the Baptist on a charger? . . . And who but Wilde, and not Sudermann nor all their predecessors in Herodian lore, has put into Herod's mouth at the crucial scene that stage whisper: "Sie ist ein Ungeheuer, Deine Tochter; ich sage Dir, sie ist ein Ungeheuer!"

The date of that was January 23, the morning after the only public performance.

If you have any logic in you, was not that critical somersault enough to shatter all pretensions for fairness and justice that newspaper may ever have had? Note too,—as a result of that passionate eagerness to please the proprietors of the opera house and the newspapers—that airy closing sentence, whereby Wilde is made author of the German translation, instead of the line: "She is monstrous, thy daughter; I tell thee, she is monstrous."

Against such splendor of encomium as the journalistic turncoats gave us that morning, the stoutest adherents of Wilde might not hope to compete. Yet, merely to maintain this history intact, here is an impression of that

performance as it struck one who for years had been signaling the European progress of this man's renown.

The Strauss music seemed magically the complement of the Wilde words, even in their German tones. Always in music, as in poetry, I have believed in sheer melody. A cave-dwelling viewpoint, perhaps, but—my own. For me it was the lyric always, whether Heine's, Carman's, or Bierbaum's, or Victor Daley's; poetry, in my philosophy, was for chronicle, or legend, or epic, an outmoded medium. In music, to the same extreme; the music-dramas of Wagner had always struck me quite as absurd as the arias in "Lucia" or "Rigoletto." In the "Imitator" there was written, "Music must be heard and not seen . . . the opera is at best a contradiction in terms. . . . It should be seen as little as any other form of music. The audience, supplied with the story of dramatic action, should follow the incidents by ear, not by eye." Yet Strauss's "Salome" almost persuaded me; as in another town, on another day, "Louise" did, and "Aphrodite" and "Le Chemineau." For there, indeed, to use that phrase again, we could follow the incidents by ear; the veriest tyro in music, so only he was sensitive in the fullest meaning of that word, could see the close relation between the orchestration and the action.

All the degeneracy of Jerusalem under the tetrarch, all the insistence on coming horror that fills the opening of Wilde's play, the mournful iteration of such thoughts as "Never have I seen her so pale!" and "Something terrible may happen," are all wrought in upon the ear by that music, as abominable and amazing as the story itself. Strauss bewildered by discords that he might enchant with beauty; he symbolised coming tragedy, regnant horror, the lust of the eye, perverted passion, and all the sensations which the Irishman framed in words. Whoever saw the *Herod* of Burrian, with his

gesticulating hands and his consuming desire, will hardly forget it; the singer may live by that performance. As for *Salome*, prototype of all her race's and her sex's oblique passions, Fremstad's version of her was perhaps a shade too luscious; so vivid was her vitality, so compelling her physical appeal, that the line "Niemals habe ich sie so blass gesehen!" fell somewhat impertinent; the pallor and the horror of the Beardsley *Salome* were missing, though all else was there.

(Not until the Spring of 1908, in the Costanzi Theatre, in Rome, did I see the absolute *Salome*, in Gemma Bellincioni. Her youthful sinuousness, her pallid beauty held the eye, as did her voice the ear. Her scene with the head of John surpassed in ghastly fascination even that bad quarter of an hour which Fremstad gave the Metropolitan Opera House. Against that scene the churchly pope issued his ban; just as the plutocratic pope had done, the year before, in New York. . . . But we go too fast. . . .)

The New World admitted, after that performance, Strauss's title as a king of tone, Wilde's vindication as artist. Six years dead, and crowned genius by his bitterest revilers.

James Huneker turned to me, as that curtain fell, and said two words: "Poor Wilde!"

But the episode was by no means over. While still the echoes of that performance were ringing through press and public, and even such plays as Sudermann's "John the Baptist" caught some of the general fury to see the girl who danced before the king, the puritans and the plutocrats were already massing for an attack. On January 26th, Heinrich Conried, the manager who, under arrangement with Richard Strauss and with co-operation of Herr Hertz as conductor, with the singers and the orchestra of over a hundred, was responsible for that "*Salome*" performance, received from the owners



of the opera house a formal protest against its repetition.

Rumor placed the impetus for that protest in the maidenly squeamishness of a certain daughter of a millionaire. If we believe that, this was indeed the crowning proof that all art in America is under dominance of the Matinee Girl. For that young person a niche should be reserved beside Anthony Comstock, Mrs. Ormiston Chant, and Carrie Nation. In the gallery of specimens showing "The Poor Taste of the Rich" she should have prominent space. But perhaps rumor lied; let us return to the record.

The directors present when further performance of "Salome" was banned included these:

Pierpont Morgan, W. K. Vanderbilt, August Belmont, H. McK. Twombly, Geo. G. Haven, A. D. Juillard, Geo. F. Baker, D. O. Mills, Geo. F. Bowdoin and Charles Lanier.

To the action taken by these gentlemen a fame will attach such as none of their millions are likely to obtain for them. For fame has many varieties.

If opinion and emotion be altogether shelved, cold reason must still wonder why, if interference was to take place, it did not occur before instead of after the performance. The play was ten years old and had been shown in every capital in Europe; the music was a year old, and might have been heard in half a dozen other places in that period; the preparations for the New York performance had been months in the making. Never, in those months, did these lictors of our morals make a protest. Several of them were persons who had maintained a notorious activity in accumulating such art-objects, the world over, as the taste of others and their own money could procure; their banding together to forbid, for that time being, the public's enjoyment of this or that art-object, was absurd in the extreme. With difficulty, indeed, is language on this episode kept

within reasonable limits; nothing that ever happened in the art history of America made it so plain that what with the plutocrats on the one hand and the proletariat on the other we are between the devil and the deep sea.

Only for the time being, however, was the Strauss-Wilde "Salome" deprived of American appreciation. Within two years after that episode of January, 1907, it was revived under other auspices, the name-part played by Mary Garden.

Meanwhile, on the heels of that closure, there was a period of exploitation of the factitious vogue the newspapers had aroused. Persons wrote to the newspapers declaring Salome no lady; we suspect them to have been the same persons who for years had been raving lyrically about the pleasant little stories of incest which informed those Wagner operas to which the owners of the Metropolitan Opera House had never objected. Every music-hall had its "Salome" dance; only the pianola and the phonograph and the kinetoscope remained as farther infernos. . . .

They tell us Wilde's "Salome" is not that of the gospels. True; but when we have seen and read all the versions of the legend; when we know how much quaint story is behind all that gospel for which we arrogate capital letters; we come to believe that Wilde, in his search for the curious and the sensual, came nearer the truth than any other artist. Laforgue builded a Salome; Massenet gave us the music of "Herodiade"; and Sudermann wrote his "Baptist" play. Despite Miss Julia Marlowe's art, the artificiality of the German drama became evident; that hoyden, with her flashes of childishness, of infantile cruelty and of horror at what she had done,—was only ridiculous. Sudermann succeeded only in one thing: he proved Wilde right.

Before we come to that consideration of him as essay-

ist and critic which brings him so prominently into this whole argument of mine, and most surely, I think, stamped him as the Man of Letters—as the critic of a sort America has lacked—let us look into the first so-called “Life” and the ditto “Complete Edition” published since Wilde’s death. The former was published in 1906; the latter,—though in Vienna a German translation had appeared earlier—in 1907.

The first “Life” was written by Robert H. Sherard, a journalist of Paris, who for some 16 years had known Wilde. In his one volume he included all the errors of taste and attitude that were possible. If in point of time the book was first, in appreciation of his subject’s real importance, the Sherard “Life” will rank behind all the others. For there will, of course, be many others.

In any effort to weld the double activities of this dandy, this poet, this essayist and this playwright, there lurked great danger. Save for a writer most fortunately equipped with tact upon the details of Wilde’s life, the task insured calamity. Mr. Sherard exhausted, for the time being, all calamitous opportunity. From the very beginning we perceived that Mr. Sherard was of those who believe, with Sadakichi Hartmann, that Wilde’s “morbid vagrom life will still fascinate us when his books are forgotten.” In the case of Mr. Sherard we must regret the error in judgment, and the mistaken premises on which he posed the book. Not in all his 400 pages was there anything as pungent as some passages in Max Beerbohm’s essay in “1880.” The biographer, with a sort of genius, misused most of the really vital details in the public career of this picturesque mummer who tried, in the closing of the Victorian era, to tiptoe languidly in the footsteps of Brummel and Disraeli. He saw but one color in the Wilde nimbus, and that was the color of catastrophe.

In his very Preface Mr. Sherard pointed out that what was impossible three years before, namely, the writing

of such a "Life," was finally, in 1906, possible. Which, where it was not nonsense, meant only that a Life of Wilde must be nothing but a history of his private and public disgrace. It may not have been profitable in England, in those years, to remind the public of an unsavory scandal; but for a wholesomely written volume on the man's literature and such of his life as had reasonable bearing on his literature there had been plenty of room and safety. The reason this biographer did not think the coast clear was that he was obsessed with the importance, not of Wilde the writer, but of what the newspapers termed "the Wilde affair."

Under the cloud of that obsession he wrote his "Life." Even in the family chronicles, the childhood years, etc., we were constantly prepared for the tragedy that was to come. Of the father, Sir Wm. Wilde, we had made most vivid for us his unbridled passions, his extraordinary bestiality and his wonderful mind; we could not even look in on a "salon" with Speranza, Lady Wilde, as presiding genius, without hearing the biographer's theories on heredity and crime. He was unable to give the history of those early years with only the litterateur and the dandy in view; he saw them all merely as prologue to a crime against society.

On one detail the "Life" deserved credit: for showing the poverty against which Wilde long struggled. We learned that in London society he never really reached that supremacy that others fancied to be his; that his position, such as it was, was only with the artists and literati of the town. He was never really popular; his attempt to pose as social and esthetic arbiter brought him to just such hazardous eminence as Beau Brummel's, whom the whole town joined in forgetting the moment a royal fiat went against him.

Mostly, it was the biographer's obsession that haunted us. Time and again he reminds us that disease was at the root of this man's tragedy; that he was subject to

attacks of an epileptic form. Psychopathia, megalomania, epilepsy—with these and other formidable syllables we are peppered. Nor, allowing for the biographer's unhappy bias, was it well reasoned out. If that was the crux of the man's career, as this historian asked us to believe, we naturally expected completeness and accuracy on it; both were notably absent. The account of the two trials at the Old Bailey are absurdly inadequate; any newspaper file will give you the whole tragic first act more succinctly. What the "fatal slip" was which Wilde made to Edward Carson, we are not told; nor is anything hinted of the extraordinary panic in high places which spread through London the moment the verdict against Wilde was known. Our biographer is all for theory, and facts do not appeal to him. One of his most typical moments, as theorist and apologist, is when he describes Wilde's appearance on the first-night of "Lady Windermere's Fan," a cigarette in his mouth, and something akin to insult in his curtain-speech.

I always wonder if Mr. Richard Mansfield ever smiled at this amazing paragraph of Sherard's:

The man was under the shock of a great joy. He had temporarily lost his head. He did not know what he was doing. . . . He was a bulky, full-blooded man; the blood rushed to his head, and he was unconscious of what he was doing. As to the cigarette, well, it was half-smoked. It had not been lighted for the purpose of the entry. He was such a habitual smoker that probably he did not even know that he had a cigarette in his hand. . . .

Was ever a more impudent explanation made by a dullard for a brilliant? The astounding impertinence of a man who could think like that, attempting an analysis, in physical terms, of the motives behind this man's conduct—this man who had written "The Decay of Lying."

Among the salient omissions of fact in this "Life" are these: Wilde's interest in Aubrey Beardsley; his as-



sociation with the "Yellow Book," or with Leonard Smithers the publisher; and Lord Alfred Douglas's articles in the "Revue Blanche." The names of Wilde's two sons are not given. We were told nothing as to when or how the various plays were written.

The most valuable pages in this "Life" were those not Sherard's own. Henri De Regnier's was the opinion that Wilde was wont "to tell his stories like Villiers de l'Isle Adam told them," and scattered his jewels of wit as once did Buckingham; and it was Walter Pater who declared that "there is always something of an excellent talker about the writings of Oscar Wilde"; while many a phrase of Arthur Symonds's rings longer in the memory than anything in this biography. There was no effort, though the book was written in 1906, to show, by exact dates, how, first in this country and in that, the reaction set in in Wilde's favor, and all the writings, the books and the plays came into their own again.

The most one could say of that "Life of Oscar Wilde" was that it was first in the field.

Similarly, the most one could say of the first Complete Edition of the "Writings of Oscar Wilde" published in America, was that it included everything. But it took an expert in Chinese puzzles to disentangle the apocryphal from the authentic, and to put arrangement into all that haphazard mass in 15 volumes.

Aside from the apocryphal matter, there was one volume by Wilde's mother. The plays were given completely, and that was matter for gratitude. As to when these were first performed, and by whom, we were told nothing. In fact, there was no arrangement; no orderly presentment. From the volume containing "Intentions" the essay called "The Truth of Masks" was omitted, and inserted in a volume labeled "Poems in Prose." An Introduction by Richard Le Gallienne ap-

peared in the volume of "Poems." Even here we found but slight note of individual opinion. The volume called "His Life: With a Critical Estimate of his Writings" was simply and admittedly a compilation from newspapers and familiar documents of that sort. The episode which so obsessed Sherard's "Life" is here slighted; which is quite as well, if definite accuracy was not to be attempted at all.

Nowhere was there coherence or logical arrangement. Bits of biography were sandwiched between poems and prose, and casual critical fragments appeared anywhere. A volume called "Epigrams" was entirely superfluous, since it merely repeated sentences and paragraphs to be found in proper context elsewhere in the edition.

The only volume, aside from the plays, which had the least novelty for the average amateur of Wilde, was called "Essays, Reviews and Criticisms," in which was jumbled, higgledy-piggledy, what Wilde is supposed to have written while editor of the *Woman's World*; though nothing in this "edition" so specifies. Without date or other clue, all these pages are simply set before you, for you to make the best of. If you find true metal, you are still irritated by not knowing the date of it. Even so, there are lines that sound the value of this man's criticisms. Of an early volume by W. B. Yeats, we find Wilde writing: "It is impossible to doubt, after reading his present volume, that he will some day give us work of high import." There were memorable phrases in his comment on W. E. Henley, whom he dowered with "not merely a delicate sense of beauty and a brilliant, fantastic wit, but a real passion also for what is horrible, ugly or grotesque."

(It is curious, in this connection, to recall that from prison and hospital we have, in our time, had three wonderful bits of artistry: Wilde's "Ballad of Reading

Gaol"; the verses of Verlaine; and the "In Hospital" pages by W. E. Henley.)

Only Wilde himself could properly have phrased an opinion of the first American "Complete Edition" of his writings. It was well that he died before he saw it.

The most salient utterances of Wilde the man of letters, the critic, are to be found in his essays. Paradox and mood were always paramount in his written expressions of himself; never more so than in the volume we know as "Intentions." Here the wisdom under his paradox was most discoverable. Here, whether mindful or not of his actual life, one most clearly discerned his characteristic attitudes. Here were the most precious utterances of this amateur in art and life; here the most definite proofs that he was indeed, in his own words, "the critic as artist,"—and therein represented the triumph of a type unknown in America. Jewels of wit and paradox were scattered so profusely in those pages, that if once we started to pick them up, only sheer weariness would give us pause. Truly we could declare, as William Watson did of Lowell, that the brilliance "is so great and so ubiquitous that it pays the not inconsiderable penalty of diverting our attention from the real soundness that underlies it all. So dazzling is the flash, and at times so sharp the report, that we scarcely notice the straightness of the aim."

In that portion of the bookish world fashioning its verdicts on academic formula, the existence of any essayists save Lamb, Montaigne, and Stevenson is slurred. Yet of essayists who did memorable things critically, in our time, there were at least this Irish trio (for whom we may later seek even the dimmest of possible American counterparts): Oscar Wilde, Bernard Shaw and George Moore. All said trenchant things memorably. Often impertinent, yet never negligible.

"Intentions" was magnificent with impertinence, but also with truth. As a book, it had splendidly the sincerity of Wilde's insincerity. It constantly made ridiculous the petty formulas of petty dogmatists. Observe Richard Burton—not of the Arabian Nights, but of New England—declaring that "in the essay an author stands self-revealed; he may mask behind some other forms, in some measure; but commonplaceness, vulgarity, thinness of nature, are in this kind instantly uncovered. The essay is for this reason a severe test." All that assertion about the mask and what it hides is disproven in the very first of these Wilde essays, the one entitled "The Decay of Lying"—there he declares that what is interesting about people "is the mask that each one of them wears, not the reality that lies behind the mask." How, before the nimbleness of this creature of masks and moods, can we refrain from grinning at the stolid solemnity of the dogmatists and the dealers in sententiousness?

Literature is the advertisement of one's attitude toward life. It is the record of a mood. It is the impress, writ in wax, of some mask we wore at some moment. It is a quantity of conflicting things. It is revelation, and it is masquerade. It has as many facets as life itself; it is at once chameleon and sphinx. . . .

Whatever literature may be, the essays in "Intentions" were part and parcel of it; irritating, insincere, paradoxical, but—indubitably literature. Epigram jostled contradiction; truth elbowed the fantastic; paradox played through every interval; they remained arrestingly entertaining, eminently readable. The style was brilliant, inconsequent, mannered, the essence of the man himself. This style was indeed the man; you can, if you will, read him in every line of it. Here were all the triumphant moods of his triumphant years, expressed in glittering

epigram and luminous diction; just as in the style of "The Ballad of Reading Gaol," we mark the prison bars, and in that of "De Profundus," we hear a cry of a soul desperately attempting to achieve sincerity through a chastened body. Always, above all, the style "of an excellent talker."

Every one of the essays marked a happy pose. Here was Wilde in his gayest moods. The essay on "Pen, Pencil and Poison," with its uncanny forecast of his own plight, has already been referred to. It was in the essay on "The Critic as Artist" that we have that wonderful array of arguments ennobling the whole art of criticism. In "The Decay of Lying" also there was much lucid and yet elusive interpretation of the function of criticism. Never, in all these pages, is the reader safe in assuming that the brilliant manner had no wise matter behind it. Mannered matter, true, from a mannered man; but under the panoply of paradox, where commonplace could not enter, the truth was often hidden. Let me instance the much discussed theory about art imitating life. We need not pretend that it was new with Wilde, but he most adroitly set it forth, so that it was as vehemently disputed as if it had indeed been unheard of in Eckermann's Conversations and elsewhere.

Wilde's whim, you will find, insisted on the imitations that life gave of artistic inventions. He told of English feminine beauty actually taking on the lines and hues first created by certain painters; he told of a woman who acted exactly upon the Becky Sharp model; he gave instance on instance. Since then, history has conspired to uphold his theory. Sir Walter Besant, in "The Doubts of Dives" gave us a trenchant example. The late Julian Ralph gravely recounted the incident of a New York art school model who suddenly, unconscious of Du Maurier's heroine, refused to pose for the altogether. In the early years of the present decade a dancer appeared on the European continent, Mlle. Madeleine, who pretended that



she could only perform while in a trance, *à la* Trilby. Finally, do you recall the incident of Wilde's curtain speech, cigarette in hand, a green carnation in his coat? In the spring of 1905, nearly ten years later, in other words, a florist of Los Angeles, in California, produced from the soil a green carnation.

After that, and much like it, can we quite laugh down such a sentence as this, from "The Decay of Lying": "A great artist invents a type, and Life tries to copy it, to reproduce it in popular form, like an enterprising publisher"?

Throughout these essays there was the effort to build up a high estimate the world should give to criticism. Always the plea is for the critic whose art is also creative. He declared that "the only portraits in which one believes are portraits where there is very little of the sitter and a great deal of the artist," and we need only think of Whistler and Sargent to realise the germ of truth in that. It was in "The Critic as Artist" that we have Wilde at his best, as brilliant essayist, keen critical analyst, and as our greatest voice, with Walter Pater, in proclaiming the heights to which the critic can and should strive. In that essay were all those many memorable and witty phrases about his contemporaries, which rank with certain other impudent and amusing passages in George Moore's "Confessions of a Young Man." Mr. Henry James, we were told, "writes fiction as if it were a painful duty"; Mr. Hall Caine writes "at the top of his voice," and of Meredith he penned the immortal phrase that "his style is chaos illumined by lightning." He deplored the novel with a purpose, despised Zola, admired Balzac; and summed up his theory of literature by declaring that it meant "distinction, charm, beauty and imaginative power."

The function of criticism in its relation to art and life has never been better expressed than in Oscar Wilde's essay on "The Critic as Artist."

Steeped as he was in classic lore and legend, deeply as he had in his learning and travels, entered into Greek life and thought, Wilde's attitude in criticism was always a personal one, the record of brilliant personal impressionisms. Whom have the protagonists of the academic formula, and the impersonal standard, to bring into the scale of art against Wilde?

No historian, Mr. Charles Whibley or another, has yet properly chronicled Oscar Wilde in his esthetic period. The early meed of notoriety which came to his person and his art was all in the interest of dandyism. Where others had chosen severe simplicity, he reverted to the Oriental, as D'Orsay, D'Aurevilly and others had done. No man who, aside from his own writings, has contributed to art and letters the Du Maurier sketches and the satire of Gilbert & Sullivan, can be omitted in a history of dandyism. The pose, the insincerity of Wilde, were no more marked than in the other dandies. Brummel invented a cravat; Wilde revived the glories of peacock feathers, of velveteen and sunflowers. Like Scrope Davies, the beau whom Brummel outshone, Wilde died in poverty in Paris. Like Beau Nash, he made elegance his income. The boredom, the weariness and the vanity of the true dandy were all his. In his efforts to make propaganda for Beauty, he deviated from true dandyism; he should have compelled by example, not cajoled by fine phrases. Yet, with all his defects from a dandy's perfection, he impressed himself on the 'Eighties of the nineteenth century quite as sharply as did Brummel on an earlier period.

Wilde's essay on "Pen, Pencil and Poison" belongs memorably in the literature on dandyism. Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, friend of Charles Lamb, was, we are told, dandy as well as poisoner and artist. "Like Disraeli, he determined to startle the town as a dandy, and his beautiful rings, his antique cameo breast-pin, and

pale lemon-colored gloves were well known"; he "sought to be somebody rather than to do something. He recognised that Life itself is an art, and has its modes of style no less than the arts that seek to express it." That sentence must rank with the other memorable definitions of dandyism. Wainewright, we are told, maintained his own dandyism at a difficult crisis; in prison, he said: "I have been determined through life to hold the position of a gentleman. I have always done so. I do so still. It is the custom of this place that each of the inmates of a cell shall take his morning's turn of sweeping out. I occupy the cell with a bricklayer and a sweep, but they never offer me the broom!" In that touch we find Wainewright's right to rank with Brummel delirious at Caen, and with Beau Nash, Scrope Davies, and Wilde himself, dying squalid and proud deaths.

A German writer, Franz Blei, writing of Wilde, observed that "English society is always ruled by a dandy and not only since the days of Brummel and Selwyn. The greater the dandy, the more absolute his rule. Wilde was the acknowledged master and tyrant; he lashed that society and spared not, and it cringed before him, since he was dandy by the grace of God. . . . Wilde was both a dandy and a genius; democracy can suffer neither in the long run . . . as a dandy he was of the type that spends its life declaiming. No poet ever set art above nature more nobly than Wilde, for his ambition was not to be a poet, but more than that: a dandy. . . . He could assert his paradox only as a dandy; as poet he went counter to it. Then he had fashioned art into his life; now (in "the Ballad of Reading Gaol") life fashioned him to his art."

As to whether dandyism to-day be dead or not, there are conflicting views. Certainly, since Wilde, there have been but faint efforts to deserve the name. Some hold that dandyism, if not quite dead, is at least obscured by the bright light which beats on it from a thousand

newspaper offices, and insist that a dandy, to-day, faces a harder task than did Brummel, since our mode of male apparel has reached a rigidity hard to conform to individual distinction. But those pessimists, I think, mistake the material of dandyism for its soul. To side with the pessimists would be to admit that because all tailors cut upon the same pattern, one man must seem as commonly dressed as all his neighbors.

Those who believe there can be no more dandyism in the world are of identical kidney with those who say that there need be no more style in writing. If you will hark back to my chapter on style and on masks, you will see how these two matters—of dandyism in literature, and style in writing—have nearly all their qualities in common.

Let the professors open ever so wide the gates to mediocrity, only by the saving salt of style, in life and letters, can American Art survive. Study but ever so little the literature of dandyism and you will recoil with the more horror from the floodtide of the commonplace that is drowning individuality.

The dandy is a critic of life. He shows perfection to the others. The critic exercised that same function upon letters. Wilde was both Dandy and Critic.

If we here in America had more such critics as that, neither our living nor our writing would be of such a twilight monotone.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

IN the house of art, as in the world itself, there are many mansions. Fresh air blows in some; while in others, as in that of Wilde, there is the odor of the hot-house, the patches and perfume of the posed rather than of the real. There is room for all. It is as absurd to decry the cult of the barbaric as to deplore the popularity of Mere Manners. To be human and logical, we must admit the existence of both the unkempt, dirty, untrammelled ragamuffin as of the self-conscious posturing dandy. Watteau painted one truth; Josef Israels painted another; Degas is as true as Tadema. The truth has as many colors as the rainbow, and life admits of as many interpretations as there are temperaments.

Attempting to trace in America something of an international wave of "youthfulness" in art contemporaneous with Oscar Wilde's career meets with but slight success. In the province of consciously postured art but little had been achieved since Poe died. When we remember that against Poe the tumult and the shouting have even now not quite died down, we must realise that the climate here has never been of the best for the most precious expressions of art. Conscious postures have mostly produced refinement of artistry; one hesitates to imagine a crude talent with impudence enough to attempt definite attitudes in any of the arts; or, where such crude talents—as in the case of Hamlin Garland counseling ploughboy prose, or of George Ade proclaiming "the zippy show" to be the salvation of the American drama—have achieved such impudence, we put them as soon as possible into oblivion. Many a crude talent we have welcomed; the Whitmans, the Joaquin Millers,



and even the Jack Londons appealed to us simply because, however uncouthly, they voiced something of our great cosmic crudity itself; finished artists filled us, an unfinished people, with distrust. Because Ambrose Bierce wrote with as crystally cold an art as De Maupassant, we long kept aloof from him because—if beyond the vague distrust of over-refined workmanship we had any excuse at all!—we thought him in no wise “American” as an artist.

Though we were introduced many years ago, by Stuart Merrill, by Vance Thompson, by James Huneker, by Philip Hale, and others, to many of those men who, in other parts of the world, were producing art, conscious of its attitudes and its youthfulness, we have never been properly enthusiastic over such product, and if by chance such article emanated domestically we preferred a dignified, not to say stupid, aloofness. Against Verlaine, against Arthur Rimbaud and his beloved vowels, against Dowson and his “yesternight” and against Arthur Symons—the Symons of the day before Youth gave him warning—we had little to show. That entire, considerable school of art which, according to the temperament of the critic, has been dubbed decadent, symbolistic, impressionistic, romantic or merely Young, had but slight American equivalent. Lafcadio Hearn introduced us to some of the most modern gems of Orient and Occident; William Sharp adopted the pose of Maeterlinck and other Belgians; but in the main we looked scornfully on that phase of art; and the names of Richard Dehmé, of Jules Laforgue, of Franz Wedekind and of O. J. Bierbaum were unknown to our majority while it prattled glibly about the “best seller.”

Only for a short period in the last decade of the nineteenth century was there the slightest effort away from commercial art in America. That was during the reign of what we may call the pamphlet and the poster movements.

After the Chicago Exposition of 1893, which had done something to spur the American public toward appreciation of the finer things of life, there ensued a period of material depression, which did not lift until 1895. There began then one of the most curious revivals in taste that our time has witnessed. Very little of that has survived, but it may be interesting to glance at some of that movement's illusory eccentricities. Looked at from this distance, no definite result seems to have been reached. Some clever young men came to light in the course of that movement; but they have now become as orthodox as their elders. Yet for the oddities and impertinences—the evidences of reckless youth—that time brought forth, it will be entertaining to recall it.

You may easily trace the inception of the movement to the English "Yellow Book," that bilious explosion of long smoldering revolt against conservatism in English art and letters. Inasmuch as an American, Henry Harland, was at the helm, and the triumphant notoriety of Oscar Wilde was the main cargo, the "Yellow Book" did not fail of effect on the more impressionable younger element in America. The fascinating drawings of an uncannily clever youth, Aubrey Beardsley, aided in giving this periodical a scandalous success. Scandal removed Mr. Wilde; Beardsley forsook the "Yellow Book" for the "Savoy," and consumption removed him from this life; but the seed was already planted in America, and there appeared a crop of strangely fashioned periodicals, preaching fantastic doctrines, uttering weird thoughts, but all expressive of youth and of dreams of non-commercial art.

The University of Harvard was, by way of Alma Mater at least, responsible for the first efflorescence of the New in American periodical literature. It is true that the "Chap-Book" was born in 1894; but its matter and manner were so much upon the models indicated by the "Yellow Book" and the "Butterfly"—L. Raven-Hill's

charming magazine, which to-day is still the delight of many a wise collector—that it may be reckoned as in the movement of 1895. Started by the energy of two Harvard students and the poetic intelligence of Mr. Bliss Carman, a Canadian, this cheeky little cherub of a magazine met with a peculiar success. Its tinyness; its calm audacity; its inconsequential airiness—touched the keynote of wide appreciation. The first volume took its place among the rarities of the amateur. The watchword of the magazine was: Fads! If there was no fad in existence it created one. It made a fad of artistic posters; it fostered the cult of Aubrey Beardsley's American contemporary, Will H. Bradley. In the "Chap-Book" was found much New Humor; but eventually this *enfant terrible* began to give pink teas, to make much of Great Personages, and curb its bold impertinence; the novelty was exhausted; the old audacity gone; and before its pale insipidity public interest flagged and died. So, eventually, did the "Chap-Book." Yet it had started the movement.

Philadelphia had a quarterly entitled "Moods," to which contributed Walter Harte, and John Sloan, an artist who has since become known. San Francisco joined the chorus with "The Lark," the maddest of all these youthful flings into the absurd. Printed abominably on butcher's paper, appearing at no regular intervals; it was unfailingly original in its candor and simplicity. It was a vigorously successful pose; a practical joke upon the public. Gelett Burgess was one of "The Lark's" mainstays.

Harte's "Fly-leaf" and Hubbard's "Philistine" have been referred to on another page. From New York itself, in all that period of revolt, there came but one memorable note of sympathy. Though for years the centre of the publishing business of the United States—the gold-field luring artistic miners from the rest of the continent—New York would have required of the historian of this

movement the oblivion of omission had it not been for three bold buccaneers: Mr. Vance Thompson, writer, and Messrs. T. E. Powers and T. Fleming, artists. They expressed themselves fortnightly in "Mlle. New York" fearlessly and unconventionally. They scorned the public so as to gain approval of the few.

Few of these evidences of a one-time artistic uplift in American individualism have survived. Among these is "The Papyrus," medium for Michael Monahan's Irish free-lance. In the main, there is left of all that pamphlet movement nothing but a reputation or two.

The art of the *affiche* traveled about this time across the Atlantic. The achievement of Cheret, Grasset, Steinlen and Beardsley was paralleled by that of Bradley, Louis Rhead, Edward Penfield, John Sloan, Ethel Reed, F. A. Nankivell and other American artists. A periodical, the "Echo," appeared on purpose to foster the cult of the artistic poster; despite much exaggeration, a definite improvement in the art of pictured advertisement was gained.

It was an interesting period, and, in view of the dominant commercialism of this later decade, somewhat pathetic to look back on. It had plenty of the follies of youth; but it meant real artistic ferment, struggling growth; it was a battle for new life in our art.

Where is such battling now? Has our prosperity indeed made futile all those young ideals?

It was not until ten years later that the note of that time recurred in a slender volume of verse which, though by an American, brought back all that crew of mannered artists, Wilde and Rimbaud, and Ernest Dowson. To a few critical persons the curious, precious verses of Wilbur Underwood, appearing infrequently in more or less obscure corners, had been known for some years; but until his volume "A Book of Masks" appeared, it

was not possible to consider him any more seriously than we can consider the other estrays of genius who wander now and then, however, briefly, into the most barren places. The smother of mediocrity keeps these beyond the public ken, while the ephemera of the many-tongued fools are shouted from the house-tops.

This small figure is significant enough; against its exotic outlines the robust prosperity of our best sellers looms all the more fatuously inartistic. Significantly enough, too, "A Book of Masks" was published not in America, but in London. The title itself makes any lengthy elucidation of this fragment of precious art unnecessary; the volume is almost the only evidence that in America there is still some stir of that art which filled Villiers de l'Isle Adam, Jules Laforgue, and Ernest Dowson. Between Underwood's "Book of Masks," indeed, and Dowson's "Pierrot of the Minute," the affinity of thought is obvious. The carnival and the mask interested this young American as they have no other of his countrymen; his book is almost the only one that seems to have expressed such belief in masquerade and manner as my chapters on those subjects tried to outline.

Francis Saltus—of the Americans attempting exotic art in rhyme—tried for universality, passion, blasphemy, landscapes and liquors; the author of "The Book of Jade" reeked bitterly of mortality; Sylvester Viereck attempted imitation only of the more reprehensible of Oscar Wilde's moods. Slight as was Wilbur Underwood's intention, it was, at least, undisturbed. He chose but one small space, one quaint corner; yet there he stands alone. The tragedy, the comedy, the pose and the passion in the human masquerade, those were the strings on which he played.

Unreal and shadowy his subjects seem; Pierrots, Pierrettes, Columbines, Harlequins and Fauns hover faintly through his pages; he shows us only the most fantastic masks, the roses of carnival and the ashes of remorse.



The people to whom the precious, the gem-like in art is as a red rag, and who wave somewhat hysterically the American flag, doubtless found plenty of objections to Mr. Underwood's slender volume. The foreign model attracted him; he used French titles, and French atmosphere; he uses the "E finita la comedia" of the strolling players, while one of his poems is addressed to the memory of Aubrey Beardsley. His is, plainly, and simply, art as international as Carnival itself. Carnival's figures, the labels of its masks, have ever been the same in all languages. Mr. Underwood knew that; bravely he took his position, and then, his subject and intent sure, however slight, he achieved in "A Book of Masks" successful art.

The book should lie with its prose brother, Max Beerbohm's "Happy Hypocrite." It is the finest written expression in English of the black and white art of Aubrey Beardsley. Posed and precious as it is, there is no note of sensuality; though its message to the man is clear, a child might also read it. This is not the bizarre or the cruel sensuality the author of "Salome" was so obsessed by; Mr. Underwood's dominant strain was one of sadness; his verse had the proper solemn note of carnival leaping recklessly toward a bitter morrow.

Inasmuch as the tiny volume is almost singular in the pose of its art, in America, where the whole field of *belles lettres*—to say nothing of *belles lettres* produced by the younger men—is so sadly abandoned, I cannot forbear quoting a line or so from "A Book of Masks." The whole note of the book, I think, is in the closing poem, entitled "The End"; where this occurs:

The hour has struck; with sudden grace  
The mask is slipped from each worn face,  
And desolate eyes meet desolate eyes  
In glances of a lone surmise  
That searching deeply only see  
The veils of utter mystery;

The lights are flickering in the lamps,  
The air grown sharp with earthy damps,  
O little ghosts of sad delight,  
Pass wearily into the night.

No young man in America has done verse more purely chiseled. Nor is it altogether marble and masque that engage him; occasionally he strikes a human note, as you may see in these quoted fragments from "A Girl":

This young girl—this girl is dead;  
From the light and laughter fled;  
Into darkness and still space;  
Cover o'er the strange white face;  
Once her laughter starred the night,  
Now her laughter's taken flight.

Small her breasts were like a boy's,  
Moulded for all subtle joys,  
Cool and flower-like her lips,  
Straight and delicate her hips  
Never meant for motherhood—  
Sin made her and found her good.

This young girl—this girl is dead;  
From the light and laughter fled;  
Ladies, brutes and fellow men,  
We are laughing once again,  
As of old the noise and light  
Stream out on the ancient night,  
As of old wine-flushed and fair,  
We make joy with mocking air;  
But through all our fevered arts  
Steals a shadow on our hearts.

It is possible that this slender book expressed that slender talent to the full; yet, even so, we may cherish that tiny specimen of art all too rare on this side the Atlantic.

Aside from the pamphlet and poster movement referred to, "A Book of Masks" was one of the few evi-

dences of what elsewhere had been a notable renaissance in the more modern forms of art and literature.

That renaissance showed itself last in Germany, but, once established, flourished there more vigorously, and had more lasting effect on the entire artistic product of the nation.

However this movement, this product of what by some were called "Les Jeunes," may have excited popular derision at first, it was an expression of mental revolt against artistic formulas long since become inadequate. The cause of cosmopolitanism in art was notably enhanced by this stir among the younger men. One year the "Courrier Francais"—to cite the art of color and line rather than of letters—introduced its French readers to all the British black-and-white men, and reproduced Bradley and Penfield posters; American enthusiasts began to collect the work of Vallotton, of Felicien Rops, and in England the same persons who admired Dudley Hardy and the Beggarstaffs found time for the appreciation of Mucha and Anquetin. In Germany, for a time, art followed literature but slowly; Sudermann, Hauptmann and Humperdinck kept one side of German art to the fore; but equivalents to the "Savoy," "La Plume" or the "Chap-Book" did not appear until 1896.

Then, finally, in "Youth" (Jugend) the Germans joined the chorus. As in all the other evidences of the newer movement, this was, in its inception, a cosmopolitan enterprise. Sketches by Steinlen and Jossot, and verses by Verlaine, were side by side with the work of the Germans. Eventually this paper, with "Simplicissimus," also of Munich, became the medium for all the younger elements in Teuton art; there is to-day no more artistic, nor more successful weekly paper in the world than "Jugend." In that very success lies, too, the secret of all the success gained by an army of artists in poetry and prose whose work has, in the last two decades,

changed the whole tone of German art and German taste until to-day it is as advanced, as tolerant, as catholic as that of Paris.

Just as through the "Yellow Book" you may trace the impetus for "Jugend," so through Oscar Wilde you may find the beginnings of an entire, fascinating school of German artists in prose and verse.

As fascinating, to the student of literature, as that Romantic Movement which culminated nearly a century ago with Heinrich Heine, was the "Ueberbrettl'." Which is as if you said Super-Stage. It was an effort, begun about the first year of this century, to bridge the gulf between real art,—literary and musical,—and the music-hall. It occurred to such men as Ernst Von Wolzogen, Detlev Von Liliencron, Richard Dehmel, Otto Erich Hartleben, Frank Wedekind, Otto Julius Bierbaum, and other artists in prose and verse, that the real lyric, admirable in print, might just as well be sung on the variety stage as the utter rot common to it; so they joined in a delightful fantastic plot to elevate the public *via* the "Ueberbrettl'." During the years that this movement reigned in Germany a hundred or so lyrical gems by these poets were set to music by Oscar Straus, Victor Hollaender, Paul Lincke, Bogumil Zepler, James Rothstein and others; strange little plays for marionettes were performed; and, despite much ridicule and caricature, the entire tone of music-hall art was raised as surely as, in France, England and America, the art of advertising had been improved by the cult of the artistic *affiche*.

In that extraordinary analysis of an unscrupulous genius "Stilpe"—a novel to be ranked with what George Moore, Jules Claretie and Ernst Von Wolzogen have done on the artistic temperament—O. J. Bierbaum outlined both the Ueberbrettl' movement, and the personal career of Frank Wedekind. It was more than outline, it was forecast. It is true that the *liaison* between literature

and the stage did not last—there were enough Mrs. Grundys even in Germany to frown it down—but it made history. It gave birth to the cabaret; and we still have left to us, in imperishable print and score, some charming lyrics set to haunting music. Gems by Heine himself were used in the course of the Ueberbrettl' movement, as were trifles by Catulle Mendés; the Gallic trend in all was typical of a tendency that had been encroaching on all German art. The caricaturists showed us Schiller as he would have appeared if he had lived to-day: singing his own songs in public. . . . That was all comic enough; but the thing itself was immensely valuable; it voiced the great change that was moving over continental art; and it was a brief revolt against the reign of rubbish in the domain of so-called entertainment.

What have we to show, in England or America, against the delightful lyrics to music the German Ueberbrettl' has left to posterity? In America, at any rate, I recall little enough: some Eugene Field lyrics in melodies by William Pommer; some Austin Dobson set to music by Francis Saltus; and some tasteful matter used by Ethelbert Nevin for his charming airs. . . . What else? Little enough.

It was a tragic history, too, that of the Ueberbrettl'; under railway arches, in obscure halls, it flourished briefly in its attempt to put real art and literature into the scheme of public entertainment. Art for the music-hall . . .! Too much literature; too little entertainment,—said the paying public; and the experiment ended in failure; a tragedy for which, as usual, the stupid newspapers and the stupider public were to blame. In "Stilpe," too, Bierbaum had forecast that tragedy. Yet, since we have those many charming books, in prose and verse, those many haunting melodies, this was a failure like so many others which, seen from a distance, was success.



As you have seen something of what, in the cabaret, the Ueberbrett! movement sank to, let us try to see what was the first dream of the artists in whom it began. For a collection of "German Chansons," to which contributed, in addition to those already named, Rudolf Alexander Schroeder, Arno Holz, Alfred Walter Heymel, Ludwig Finckh, and Gustav Falke, Bierbaum wrote an Introduction that contained the creed of these young radicals. Let me extract therefrom some salient sentences:

Art for the variety-hall! A shameful desecration, do you say? . . . No doubt they will say so; but in putting our art at the music-hall's service we are serious enough. We happen to have the idea that art may be made a part of all life. Artists, to-day, fashion chairs—chairs both useful and ornamental. So do we mean to write verses that will be read, not only be read in the study, but be hummed by the amusement-loving public. Art and craft in lyric poetry—there is our text. On that you may easily build the laws which our chansons must observe. You must be able to sing our songs; that is the main point. You must be able to amuse, with these songs, not merely an audience of æsthetes, but a general average. . . . Just as the Free Theatres have lifted the general taste a little, so we hope, by putting art into the music-hall, to raise that taste also. . . . The townsman of to-day has no longer the time or patience for great drama; he has, if I may say so, music-hall nerves; he wants change—variety. And that is what we must remember if we would appeal to other than an æsthetic minority, and if, as artists, we could really influence life itself.

My friend Stilpe, I think, first voiced this whole idea, and with his untrammelled bohemian spirit sketched such a scheme. What happened to him, you know from the book that bears his name. To-day we are to try and lift that scheme from fiction into reality. . . .

Something like that wrote Otto Julius Bierbaum, in 1900, in "Munich, in the Month of Saharet"; I have adapted rather than translated from his little pronun-

ciamiento. The "Stilpe" prophecy held true again; for the movement disappeared; but the men and their work remain. Without further reference to the group in general, every member of which has written prose and verse that will repay the reading and which tempts the translator—if the very essence of the lyric did not forbid its betrayal into other tongues, as has been so often shown in Heine and Verlaine—let us glance at a few of them a moment or two before coming to the one who seemed most representative.

Ernst Von Wolzogen is a figure whom we will hardly equal in English. Actor-manager and poet and composer, he has been artist as well as business man. Upon his own stage he has sung his own verses to his own music. He has written for the burgess as well as for the bohemian; you will find the family circle reading one side of his art quite unconscious of the radical activities of his other side. He has written humorously of the German officers; he is a gentleman and a scholar, he has been a crack officer and he is a music-hall star. His novel "Der KraftMeyer" is the best picture of the Abbe Liszt, and of musical bohemianism in general, that you will find in German. It ranks with "Stilpe," and Shaw's "Love Among the Artists" and Geo. Moore.

Frank Wedekind and his play, "Spring's Awakening," came into general international notice ten years after his Ueberbrettl' public knew him. His was an example nothing less than extraordinary. Nothing in "Stilpe," the hero of which seemed sketched accurately on Wedekind, was more startling than his career has been. He has written and he has lived passionately and bitterly; and all that written and experienced passion he has exposed, as actor, to the public. He has been his own star in tragic episodes written by himself from his own life. One does not know where to find a parallel to him. His has been the blasphemy and bitterness of a Francis Saltus and an Aristide Bruant combined. What happened

to him of tragedy, he made mumming use of. As if Oscar Wilde, writing (instead of "De Profundis") an acting tragedy of prison life, had cast himself for a star part and played it in a public theatre. . . . Will Visscher, an American rhymester, deserted the Muse, I believe, and became a player of "plantation darky" parts on the American stage; but—that is as bread and milk to the strong meat of Wedekind. The Wilde comparison is the only one to fit this case.

Let me cite but one example of Wedekind's work, printed in the first years of the century in that brilliant publication "Die Insel" in which appeared translations from Walter Pater, from Oscar Wilde, and plays and verses by Ernest Dowson, by Arthur Symons, and Francis Jammes, and innumerable others. Here were printed the lyrics by all that crew of minstrels I have named; here were the plays to music by Bierbaum which have since taken rank with the most artistic of their kind, and may be seen and heard to-day throughout Germany, and were the inspiration for such slight efforts as the "In a Persian Garden" trifles of art and music which even we in America have witnessed; Frank Wedekind's play, to which your attention is called, was entitled "Pandora's Casket." It was nothing less than a dramatic picture of the descent into that life which notoriously lured the perverted imagination of those maniacs whom the newspapers labeled Jack the Ripper. In three languages, from the luxury of that world which recruits the Follies Bergeres to that which gathers in the slums of Whitechapel, that hideous descent is painted in ghastly syllables; the final tragedy is—nothing less than that crime with which our journals and our psychiatrists were once so engaged.

But it is time we came to the literary leader of that crew which so quixotically tried, in Germany, to divorce the music-hall from the inartistic, just as the men of

the Criterion and the other independent theatres had tried, in America, to divorce the theatre from the commercial. His name is Otto Julius Bierbaum.

"Never again," said Otto Julius Bierbaum, when disaster swamped his little Trianon Theatre under the railway arch in Berlin. He had tried to give the populace the ballad that would stand print, set to music that would lift itself into the street upon the lips of the listeners. He had tried to bridge the gulf between literature and the "halls." To all appearances he had failed; the public still preferred, as before, platitudinous doggerel and A-B-C music. But Bierbaum was a humorist; he smiled and took to other activities.

Always something new, something modern. He was a modern. You would not have thought him a German at all, if you had the conventional figure of the German scholiast in mind. It is so easy to forget Heine. . . .

Bierbaum is one of the few interesting figures in contemporary literature. Name me, if you will, the picturesque adventurers in letters to-day! Surely the fingers of one hand will suffice, sweep as you may the field of insular, continental or American art. Whistler is gone; Bernard Shaw becomes a convention like the others. . . . Youth, alas, is so soon faded. The literary adventurer of to-day becomes the obese banker of to-morrow. The buccaneer and the butterfly turn into tax-paying citizens. But there is still Otto Julius. . . .

For years I hugged to myself the joy his work has brought. Intending, time and again, appreciative exploitation, I have hesitated, selfishly; as one who, knowing one of nature's loveliest nooks forbears to whisper it to vile mankind. But, inasmuch as he is that rare fellow, a Man of Letters in every sense of the word; poet, novelist, critic, playwright and propagandist for the art of life; and as his equivalent is absolutely lacking in our American scheme of literature, he must now be used to

point my moral. If his career, creative and critical, can in the slightest degree be paralleled in our world of "best sellers," we shall surely all be glad to know it.

His work covers a wide and varied range. There are countless novels and tales; many plays and playlets. His stories range from "Stilpe," that pungent mixture of satire and realism, to the "Sentimental Journey in a Motor Car" and his free version of an Italian fairy-tale (by Collodis) "The Adventures of Zaepfel Kern." "Stilpe" portrayed, as has already been suggested, to the Nth degree the logical career of a modern unscrupulous genius in words. Drink and genius mingle. But not as in Poe's case; this is more essentially of to-day; decadent tendencies are as burningly set forth as when Shaw rebukes the owners of widower's houses. Here was the tragedy in the curse of cleverness. It outlined the career of more than one victim of such cleverness; Wedekind has already been mentioned.

Then there was the poetry. Volumes on volumes of it. It was the poetry that first caught me.

We are not always young; the first fine delight in Swinburne is hardly regained. Life in our real world leaves little room for enjoyment of the lyric moods. Is it the stress of the world, or the decline in lyricism? Whatever the reason, the fact is patent; the lyric moments that stick in the memory have been all too few. A line or two of Aldrich, something in Carman and Hovey's Vagabondian verse; what else is in the majority's memory? The Lyric Muse, you are to remember, is all I harp on; she happens to be the only lady of the lot who interests me; that is my luck or my misfortune; you may call it what you like.

For the true test comes in the lyric.

That it is far easier to achieve the measure and manner of poetry than poetry itself is an old and obvious truism. Many of us have been put to making Latin



verses in our youth, and the fact that we could copy, however badly, the outlines of hexameter and pentameter, was not worth a button as indication of any real poetry concealed in us. For any person of average intelligence it is possible to imitate the rolling syllables of the epic or the ode; the old and venerable models of narrative by metric rote lend themselves to the emulation of even fifth-rate minds. The lyric is the test of true poetic art.

That may not be the generally adopted gospel. Many learned professors dispute it. The grand manner, the nobility of thought expressed in magnificent profundity, the vitally dramatic told in archaic grandiloquence—all these have their protagonists. Well, we are as we are; let our newly laureled American Milton be sterling or plated;—it has been my part never to see that element in poetry save from the viewpoint of G. B. Shaw, when he declared that he wrote his copyright version of “The Admirable Bashville” in blank verse for the reason that he had no time to put it into decent prose. . . .

The only poet who sings because he must, not because he has an infinite capacity for taking pains—and causing them—is the lyric poet. That phrase of Carlyle’s is simply one of those resounding ones handed down to posterity by that unquestioning portion of the public which does its thinking by proxy. When you can quote from the work of our professors of poetry in “the grand manner” such lyric music as is in Heine, in Swinburne,—in what Mrs. Malaprop calls Kelly and Sheets,—yes, even in Dobson, in Aldrich and in Carman and Bierbaum,—I will stand converted. Until then this simple belief remains to me: that only the music, in thought and metre, excuses poetry; all else, even Whitman and Henley, is prose forced into outmoded garments. Whitman was a great poet who wrote as he did for the same reason that Joaquin Miller wore a flannel shirt and top-boots; he was taking pains to startle, as did the wor-

shippers of the sunflower and the green carnation. He, like Henley, could find the lyric note well enough when he wanted to; only the desire for "being different" forced him to outrageous metres.

If you care for good spirited singing word-stuff, even the lighter minstrels must ever appeal more to you than the Miltons. In the supposedly proper Jovian attitude in criticism of poetry I am an utter incompetent; when you have said music, you have said my all. Mr. Hamilton Mabie, a learned authority who deserves distinction for preferring William Austin to Ambrose Bierce in the domain of the American short-story, once exclaimed happily over the gay temper and charming fancy of a pleasant English minstrel, Alfred Noyes. That only confirmed me in the belief that Mr. Noyes was no more a poet, no jollier a minstrel, than a great many artists whom Mr. Mabie probably never heard of. In Mr. Noyes's ballad of "The Barrel-Organ" there was a frequently recurring refrain:

Come down to Kew in lilac-time, in lilac-time;  
Come down to Kew in lilac-time (it isn't far from London!)  
And you shall wander hand in hand with Love in Summer's  
wonderland,  
Come down to Kew in lilac-time (it isn't far from London!).

which was pleasant enough, but surely nothing wonderful. Even the trick of repeating certain catchy portions of lines—necessary in some sorts of minstrelsy—had been exhibited quite as effectively in a poem called "The Lost Tavern," which begins thus:

There used to be a tavern at the corner of a wood,  
(Jolly boys and ladies knew the way);  
Lordy, but the lunches and the vintages were good!  
(Jolly boys and ladies knew the way.)

Here a step and there a step, the sun a-shining warm,  
Here a step and there a step, the mood a-dripping balm,  
Laugh along and sing along, a lady on your arm,  
(Jolly boys and ladies knew the way).

Which was by Henry Rightor, of New Orleans; and by no means invented, as James Huneker once invented an Australian minstrel. With Rightor there are several Australians who might indeed be named: Victor Daley and Henry Lawson; all quite as good as Mr. Mabie's fancy. Even our own Wallace Irwin's "Song for a Cracked Voice" comes well up to that "barrel-organ" tune; while I would not give them both for Otto Julius Bierbaum's "Der Alte Orgelmann Singt."

How spell the delight the first dip into a volume of Bierbaum's collected verse gave forth? Heine, Verlaine, Dobson and Gilbert; some touch of all was there; and something singularly individual, something starkly—Otto Julius. For years have I vowed I would translate some of those lovely lyrics; always the hopelessness of not betraying their loveliness prevailed. Consider the beauties gone to dust in translation; not even Bayard Taylor, Andrew Lang, Francis Saltus and Austin Dobson, have always surmounted the barriers of another tongue; the only great translations in the world are in prose, as Baudelaire's, and Lafcadio Hearn's. So I still shy from that task; the wit, the melody, the mixture of modernity and rococo, all fuse to make the lover of letters despair of ever being able to give English readers a notion of how admirably Bierbaum served the Lyric Muse in German. For a quarter of a dollar, for a shilling, you could purchase more lyric joy, in his collection—the first edition of which held nearly 400 pages—than you could buy in our language for four times that sum. Who, moreover, in our lands, would buy poetry in paper binding? What book of verse, in America,—whether paper,

cloth, boards, or plush *à la* Hubbard—ever sold to the extent of 40,000 copies in five or six years? Will you pardon this digression into facts, away from poetry? It was necessary for your understanding of how cheaply the finest lyric joy in recent years was possible.

Otto Julius Bierbaum, to be sure, was no stranger to those few who had kept their eyes open beyond their own parish; the years of the "Yellow Book," of "Pan," of the "Bunte Vogel," and of the "Insel," were still vivid in the memory; when that charming little poetic pocket-piece called "Der Irrgarten Der Liebe" (Love's Maze) appealed from a bookseller's counter, the great financial risk was easily taken. The millionaires who build art galleries, who maintain private and public libraries, who engage in Bierbaum's own affair of lifting public taste by New Theatres,—have no conception of the profit to be had from that little volume, from that quarter of a dollar.

Hardly a mood, gay or dim, but had its echo in those pages. You have already seen how, in this minstrelsy, there was much more than mere adroit versification, mere Dobsonian charm, or Gilbertian wit. It was touched with what you might call Gallic naughtiness; and above all, the true music in it was proven by some half hundred of these lyrics being set to melodies by the best of the young composers in that period of the Ueberbrettl', when they were sung in the halls, the halls that once—under the railway arch—. . . Ah, well, never again, never again!

Slight as is this impression of a fine man of letters—whose career, for creation and criticism, like the careers of Oscar Wilde, of Bernard Shaw and George Moore, no American in American conditions has been able to approach—it must not conclude without some few biographic facts about Otto Julius Bierbaum. This has been but an irresponsible glimpse at his work; for a really critical appreciation of him and his work a much

longer chapter would become necessary; indeed, another book. . . . But, having introduced him, let me give the descriptive hints with which he himself not long ago supplied us.

Born in Lower Silesia in 1865, the vice of versification lured him from the earliest years. To such an extent did he give way to it, that, spurning, as he did, the constant outlook on profit as the chief and desirable end of man, he forfeited the esteem of the several good burghers and bureaucrats who had his fate at heart. His entire lack of principle was more completely proved when he showed himself unwilling to stick to his poetic last, and went about philandering with stories, novels, librettos, plays, ballets, travel-books, fairy-tales, and goodness knows what else. The rumor of wickedly large salaries paid him for editorial work threatened to ruin him; as did his account of a trip in an automobile; only the sworn testimony that those had been stage salaries, and that he went motoring at another's expense, saved him. He never hopes to escape the public's avidity to connect the failure of the Trianon Theatre with his name. But by means of the bicycle and massage he hopes to retain his health. His lack of English prevents him playing lawn-tennis. He is done with Beardsleyism, and with books yellow, green or blue, for the time being; though he still insists that nothing that has youth in it can altogether die. And he admits to a fondness for Offenbach.

It was Kipling who, when the Vicomte d'Humieres mentioned him as a devotee of Offenbach, protested sternly in a letter to the newspapers. Between Kipling and Bierbaum there is, then, in the article of music, a gulf fixed. Perhaps, despite his ballads, Kipling has no ear; I have known one other great man of letters who lacked that. . . . Otherwise, is there so great an incongruity in breathing these two names together? One



was an earnest minstrel who mingled world-politics with his singing; the other was a genial singer of chansons who also fought valiantly, but never outside the domain of art and letters.

A literary career so picturesquely adventurous, so valuable in the creative and the critical, was it possible here in America? I do not think so. To say that we have not had men potentially as fine artists as Wilde, Bierbaum, Shaw and Moore, would be hazardous; but to say that we have not duplicated their careers is merely to record history.

Above all, such a career as Bernard Shaw's had been utterly impossible in American conditions.

## CHAPTER NINE

CAREFUL consideration of the changes that a decade or two can effect in the artistic fortunes of an individual or the art-intelligence of a public, discloses no case more entertaining than Bernard Shaw's.

Nothing, to the sophisticated student of letters, is more certain than the turning of the wheel. What has gone up, in the immediate vision, at any rate, must come down. If it has gone up too far; if it has swung beyond the proper pull of gravity and there for a time remained suspended; there will always be found plenty of persons to restore what they conceive to be the right balance.

Time was when by singing Shaw's praises you could provoke quite as much blank amazement as since legendary ages has been possible in those to whom Botticelli was a cheese. To proclaim the sanity of Shaw the critic, the infallibility of Shaw as an entertainer through the essay or the play, was only a decade and a half ago to invite the public's pity. We were thought to be madly astride a hobby-horse bound for No-Man's-Land. Slowly the wheel turned, until Shaw became as much a common craze as once his name had carried the hall-mark of dangerous eccentricity. Where once a single play of his, in Richard Mansfield's repertory, had been his only path across American footlights, the time came when nothing he had written for the theatre remained unperformed. As in the case of Wilde who, within a decade after being tabooed in our theatres and our libraries, is now come into his artistic own again, so in the case of Shaw there even came seasons when those who once sniffed at the alleged impudence of Shaw and at the impertinence

of his first adherents vied with one another in spilling on him the phrases of unintelligent adulation.

We who, ten years ago, were endangering our own reputations for sanity by waving the banner of Shaw in the faces of managers (who were only mystified), publishers (who were terrified), and public (which was healthily indifferent), lived to see Shaw, the playwright, as amazingly popular as once he was thought amazingly mad. The phrases that I myself used, all those years ago, in appreciation of the Shavian criticisms of life and of the arts, came blithely back to me from the lips and pens of people who, when my own enthusiasm was still in the infectious stage, imagined Bernard Shaw to be not so much a man as a phrase to frighten fools with. They would not be fools, not they; and so they left us reckless forerunners of fashion to die as decently and quietly as possible of the most fatal of all critical complaints: the playing bell-wether to sheep who have not yet been sufficiently frightened into following. Mutton-like, with neither memory nor conscience murdering the sleep or the intellectual somnambulism marking their days, those same managers, publishers and playgoers provided us, only a year or so ago, with a Shavian epidemic. He reached that treacherous point in the artistic career where indiscriminate fashion seized him for its own. In the intervals of being "crazy about bridge" people began to "dote on Shaw."

Reaction was inevitable. Just as there are always those who never believe in a man until by some accident or pertinacity he becomes the mode, so there are always those seeking notoriety for themselves in dragging down, as well as in setting up, the moment's idols. Many attempt to climb in the train of another's fame, as witness the many who have taken to singing Omar in other dialects (Broadway, Cockney, and police-court), or that youth who not long ago declared from the vantage-point of Union Square that he had heard Oscar Wilde walking

and talking in New York's streets. Others try to rise on the ruins they would make of others. Robert Buchanan, you may remember, attacked Rossetti. Even so, in the case of Shaw, the time came when as much energy was put to detracting from his reputation as had gone to the making of it. His drama was called conventional; his criticism was written down as mere juggling; his whole career was pictured as that of a Court Fool. Otherwise dignified English reviews were not sparing in such epithets as "blue-behinded ape."

To ask why, to explain, is as futile as obvious. Shaw remains the same whom first we overmuch neglected and then overpraised. There was no falling off in his normality of view, which affrighted us in our unconscious myopia, nor in the general sanity of his work. There was no reason for the changing attitude, save as there is reason for the wheel's turning. In the wake of intelligent appreciation there must inevitably come, it seems, a period of unreasoning depreciation.

The modish weary easily of their modes. Like the Athenians they seek always some new thing without asking, as one hopes they did in Athens, if what was new yesterday is not finer than what looms new on the morrow. The real artist, however, is always secure above the caprices of the mode. These may touch him or leave him; if his worth, his work, be real, it remains unspoilt by the feverish acclaim of fashion and unmoved by its Parthian arrows. Whatever the mode among our readers or our playgoers, Bernard Shaw remains, for the discriminating of to-day and to-morrow, the strong artistic, critical figure he has been since first he appeared on our horizon. Always, whether posing through essays, or through stories or through plays, he has been a most sane philosopher and an excellent entertainer.

It is as a critic, as an essayist, that Shaw will live. His plays have never been aught but essays in dialogue form. Insincere as he has often pretended to be, as a

socialist critic he has ever been sincere and congruous. Play upon play of his is merely a socialist essay in disguise. It is only as I may impress on you his importance as essayist, as critic, that I hope to enlist your interest in this now so hackneyed subject. Often enough, listening to the chorus that sang praise or dispraise of Shaw the playwright, I came to doubt my own existence as pioneer in the matter; fortunately I had documents and dates in my favor.

For some years we of the bygone century were still able to hug the thought that of Shaw the Critic we would not be robbed, because so much of him, expressing itself directly in that medium, was buried in the files of the *London World*, the *Saturday Review* and elsewhere. Besides, he had averred, years ago, that to rehash his journalistic matter was for him the depth of horror; it was the desperate thought of that brink of shame which drove him to playwriting. Yet he was to break his word, to let his dramatic criticism, resurrected, be put into a book. He displayed these critical wares of his as publicly, as unashamedly, as if he had not specifically guaranteed to us, his faithful admirers from of old, the sole right and delight in them.

It was outrageous!

But there still remain the musical criticisms, the criticisms on paintings, decently buried; and there remains, above all else, for me to show how every line he wrote has been nothing else than criticism.

It was in May of the year 1901 that I first observed in print that no Irishman of our time had been more unfalteringly entertaining than Bernard Shaw.

In none is the Celt's inherent kinship to the mountebank more evident; not one has better used the cap and bells to impart logic in guise of paradox. Many of his qualities he shared with Oscar Wilde, some with George Moore. Each of these, for better or for worse, left his



impress on the generation that saw the Nineteenth pass into the Twentieth Century.

Bernard Shaw was, above all else, the prophet of the preface. These critical essays were at once socialist philippics, analyses of the modern theatre, modern art and modern taste, and the most persuasive form of autobiography. Though by now there are many books about Shaw, you may still find as much as is essential of his life and his intellectual evolutions—not to say convulsions—in his various Prefaces. He has robbed both his friends and his enemies of a task full of fascination: the writing of his biography. He made the occupation of rolling logs for him an impossibility; no other could compete with himself at that. Above all, his prefaces—indeed all his critical writing—teemed with those qualities so absent in American critical writing in the same period, personality and prejudice.

Asking you to remember always that I consider nothing Shaw wrote to have been other than critical essays, I must, in this present glimpse at him, pay but indirect attention to such of his work as was presented in guise of novels and plays.

Firstly, let us glance at his own whimsical account of how he reached his first successes as a critic.

His novels had done him no good; he was a Socialist and so cared little for the brilliant life of Society. Chancing to have his eyes examined, he was told he had that rare quality, perfectly normal sight, conferring the power of seeing things accurately as they are. He saw, at once, the explanation of his failure in fiction; he had still to earn his living by his pen; he turned critic. And then, he declares, all he had to do “was to open my normal eyes, and with my utmost literary skill put the case exactly as I saw it, to be applauded as the most humorously extravagant paradoxer in London.” In that sentence you have the gist of Shaw’s attitude toward him-

self and the public. It was much the same attitude as Bismarck's, who found truth the greatest of a diplomat's weapons; it was the one thing that was never believed. His skill in putting his pen upon a truth which to others seemed a fiction was what made him so unusual. As for the ego in his critical cosmos, it took on another shape from that of Mr. Max Beerbohm; the latter, while still he was trying to force public attention to himself, took the pose of : "What a clever little boy am I!"; while Shaw only used such crystal, impeccable logic as Ambrose Bierce employed. His appearance of egoism came more from the hypocrisy of the multitude than from anything within himself.

He continues, reminiscently, telling us of how he survived "seven years of London's music, four or five years of London's pictures, and about as much of its current literature, wrestling critically with them with all my force and skill. . . . An Alpinist once, noticing the massive soles of my boots, asked me whether I climbed mountains. No, I replied; these boots are for the hard floors of the London galleries. . . . I once dealt with music and pictures together in the spare time of an active revolutionist, and wrote plays and books and other toilsome things into the bargain." As critic, in short, he "enjoyed the immunities of impecuniosity with the opportunities of a millionaire." Note, too, this line or so on critics and criticism: "Democracy has now handed the sceptre of the despot to the sovereign people; but they too must have their confessor whom they call Critic. Criticism is not only medicinally salutary; it has positive popular attractions in its cruelty, its gladiatorship, and the gratification its attacks on the great give to envy, and its praises to enthusiasm."

\* It is just because this great American democracy is trying to do without criticism, that its literature is in such parlous state, and that this book is written. Not

one of those critical qualities which Shaw held to be "medicinally salutary" has in recent recollection been allowed to disturb our present commercialism.

Contrast, if you please, Shaw's "opportunities of a millionaire" with Walter Harte's "I am the poor, rebellious pawn of my stomach. . . ." There is the gulf between the Irishman who succeeded and the American who failed. And that gulf springs more from the difference in national taste than in the individuals.

Eventually, as he humorously pretended, Shaw foresaw the failing of his critical powers. He began to repeat himself, and to fall into a style which, to his great peril, was recognised as at least partly serious. As consciousness of this came to him, he saw but one thing left; rehash his critical work for book publication he would not (though he did, in later years), but he would publish his plays. It was not my intention to consider the fortunes of those plays, on the stage and off; all that history is too obviously familiar. But, in the prefaces he published with those several volumes, he continued to be, directly as well as indirectly, a most entertaining critic, and from that side he aids our argument here. Always, immitigably, he has been a critic; whether he called a book of his by this or that play-title, it was still merely an essay in dialogue form prefaced by an essay in monologue form.

In all his directly critical work and his Prefaces you may depend upon finding enough material to give a vivid notion of the critic's personality and achievements, and a deal of illumination upon art in general, and the state of the English drama in particular.

Quite aside from the noise his plays caused in print and performance (not only in England and America but on the European continent), their publication between covers marked an improvement in the literary aspect of the English-speaking drama. Mr. George Moore, an-

other Irishman, whom I also prefer to consider greater in criticism than in any other artistic medium, had written, in an essay published between covers in 1891, that the playwrights of his time and tongue were but "third, fourth and fifth-rate men of letters." He instanced Burnand, G. R. Sims, W. G. Wills, Henry Arthur Jones, S. Grundy, A. W. Pinero, and Robert Buchanan. Mr. Buchanan, in Moore's opinion, was then the "most distinguished man of letters the stage can boast of, and Mr. Robert Buchanan is a minor poet and a tenth-rate novelist." Mr. Shaw made it impossible for Mr. Moore, or for another, to repeat that accusation.

It is impossible to escape the parallel between those two Irishmen, Shaw and Moore, just as between Wilde's paradox and Shaw's the comparison is also inevitable. Though in doing so we forestall somewhat the definite critical consideration of George Moore's achievements as a man of letters, which is to have, presently, a chapter of its own, it may pertinently be observed, here and now, that Moore has written and adventured much as Shaw did. His experiences with Free theatres, in France, in England, and in Ireland, gave him text for many amusing essays. Fine novelist as we must regard him, I like him best as the critical controversialist. Whether it was the pose of seeking out the adventures of other souls in art, as in "The Confessions of a Young Man," or the later poses of forsaking England for Ireland, and vice versa, his critical writings were always worth attention. Barring the Shaw prefaces, few are so amusing as that of this other Irishman to his play "The Bending of the Bough," or his Apology for the American edition of "Memoirs of My Dead Life."

"The Bending of the Bough" was but a poor thing; but the preface was quite in the fine frenzy of a wild Irishman. The points whereat these two Irishmen touch are innumerable. Like Mr. Shaw, Moore had no scruples about altering his opinions. Once, for instance, Mr.

Moore believed there were at least a thousand Londoners willing to subscribe to the support of an independent theatre; ten or eleven years later he informed us that there was no art in all England, that he was for turning his back on London, and trying Dublin. A little later, he crossed the Irish Channel again. . . . Ah, these knights errant of pen and pencil and mask, what would we have done without them? Whistler vowed he would never live in Paris again; then he took the same oath against England; Mr. Mansfield refused to act, preferring the career of a critic; next he eschewed curtain speeches, and lectured to colleges; oh, it was a mad world, indeed, yet take out the Dandies and the Irishmen—and not for many pages have we mentioned any others—and it would be but a grey and gloomy place.

While no play of Mr. Shaw's failed, as did Mr. Moore's "The Bending of the Bough" and "The Strike at Arlingford," the latter writer is the greater novelist. The musical temperament, however, is as keenly limned in "Love Among the Artists" as in "Evelyn Innes." In criticism the honors are about even; both have written of books, of music, of painting, as well as of the drama; in all, from their pens, there was originality of view and fearlessness of expression. Much as the two have in common, however,—their tiltings at the British philistine, their lashings of the theatre, its management and its public—in the essential of humor they are the world apart. Mr. Moore sometimes seems to have no humor at all; of the Celtic character he has retained only the melancholy. Of the lightning-like vision of Shaw, whose paradox is as vivid as his logic is comprehensive, Mr. Moore is devoid. Yet how much these minds have in common was emphasised in Shaw's Preface to his "Plays for Puritans."

Mr. Shaw opened that particular essay by a witty account of the mental and physical collapse into which four years' activity as a critic of the London theatre



had thrown him; and proceeded to take up the story of the English theatre in general, its conditions and its chances. Summing up, we may find some slight differences of opinion on the subject of British taste between Shaw and Moore. Shaw held that the Englishman does not know how to play; he wishes the theatre to be only a place of excitement or amusement; the majority of playgoers having "neither the philosopher's impatience to get to realities (reality being the one thing they want to escape from) nor the longing of the sportsman for violent action." Against that you may put a passage from Moore, wherein he declared that it is to dramatic writing that we must look to discover the depths to which an art can sink "when it is written and produced at the mutual dictation of the gallery god, who for a shilling demands oblivion of his day's work, and the stockbroker who for 10s. 6d. demands such amusements as will enable him safely to digest his dinner." But the doctors differ in their conclusions: Moore's was the notion to "liberate the theatre from the thralldom of money is the truly great adventure which awaits the rich man"; while Shaw merely regretted that "the substitution of sensuous ecstasy for intellectual activity and honesty is the very devil."

Shaw was content to expose causes and conditions, and indicate his own attitude. When he saw our age "crowning the idolatry of Art with the deification of Love" he revolted. There Moore was with him. He had written: "It would have been better if the Puritan had applied himself to the redemption of the theatre, for in abandoning it to the taste of the licentious mob he aggravated the evil, and now the Puritan joins hands with the artist in condemning the theatre. . . . They both wish art to be serious, and the arguments for and against the theatre are held by the artist and the Puritan; the public seeks merely to be amused."

There is hardly an end to the contrasts and parallels

to be found for that Preface of Shaw's for his "Plays for Puritans." Recall that famous passage in Wilde's "Intentions" on nature imitating art, and then note Shaw's version of the effect of maudlin theatricals: "The worst of it is, that since man's intellectual consciousness of himself is derived from the descriptions of himself in books, a persistent misrepresentation of humanity in literature finally gets accepted and acted upon. . . . I have noticed that when a certain type of feature appears in painting and is admired as beautiful, it presently becomes common in nature." Between the Irishmen who so differently set forth this same notion there was only a decade or so. Shaw's conclusion to his argument that stage morals may corrupt actual morals was in his assertion that "ten years of cheap reading have changed the English from the most stolid nation in Europe to the most theatrical and hysterical." At about that same time, it is true, Mr. Max Beerbohm was still using his belief in the stolidity of the English temper to explain the fact that there were no good English-speaking actors in the world; an explanation which Ambrose Bierce had used many years ago for the same phenomenon.

But—how many edges are taken from delight by a too retentive memory! Whether Mr. Shaw went with or counter to Wilde or Moore; or whether Beerbohm repeated Bierce; this is all of little moment save as proving that in the originality of all clear critical minds there is kinship.

That same Walter Harte, whom America allowed to perish because he was a critic and not a lick of boots, is the only American who accurately forecast such egoistic criticism as Shaw gave us. Note this passage, from the preface "On Diabolonian Ethics," in which Shaw defended his egoism: "The reason most dramatists do not publish their plays with prefaces is that they cannot

write them, the business of intellectually conscious philosopher and skilled critic being no part of the playwright's craft. Now, what I say is, why should I get another man to praise me when I can praise myself? I have no disabilities to plead; produce me your best critic, and I will criticise his head off. . . . I leave the delicacies of retirement to those who are gentlemen first and literary workmen afterwards. . . . I have advertised myself so well that I find myself, whilst still in middle life, almost as legendary a person as the Flying Dutchman."

Which, however ashamed it should make all the press-agencies of our time, was literally true. The secret, to be sure, was that Shaw really had something to advertise. Against the fine candor in that passage, put this, by Moore: "We all want notoriety, our desire for notoriety is hideous, if you will, but it is less hideous when it is proclaimed from a brazen tongue than when it hides its head in the cant of human humanitarianism. Humanity be hanged! Self, and after self a friend; the rest may go to the devil!" the first of which has my full approval, as declaring Bernard Shaw more admirable than Hall Caine; but the latter phrases I dislike, as smacking somewhat too grossly of the Tammany code in politics. But is it not curious how the Socialist, Bernard Shaw, and the temporary pagan, George Moore, get to the identical text?

What was most charming in that preface "On Diabolonian Ethics" had been antedated by Walter Harte early in the year 1896 in a paper which, indeed, surely put finger on the secret of that charm. Mr. Harte pointed out, what those who too much admired and too much despised Shaw had altogether forgotten, that "Heine, who wrote with so much charm about himself, and could scarcely have found a more interesting subject . . . was of the opinion that . . . autobiography is the most irresistible form of literature." Mr. Harte went on

to propose the introduction of the brief critical autobiography,—just the sort of literature, in other words, that Mr. Shaw later gave us. “In this we may get much good literature,” said Mr. Harte, “*for the dullest man is at his best when writing about himself. A man can then be independent, and still be heralded in print as one of the potent forces and geniuses of his day.*” (The italics are mine.)

If that does not sound like prophecy, what does? It is a pity its author could not have practised his theory as successfully as did our Irishman. But the conditions here, as I have written this book to maintain, have continuously forbidden just such a career as Bernard Shaw’s in America.

What, in America, have we had of such candidly egoistic criticism—criticism that explains the critic as much as the subject? Mr. Vance Thompson, it is true, in some of his quicksilver enthusiasms for the exotic, displayed a passion in impressionistic criticism which had plenty of ego in it; but it might have impressed more forcibly if he had not himself once vowed that he was “sick of the fluent impressionism of Lemaitre and George Bernard Shaw.” At that moment he was writing about Ernest La Jeunesse, the Frenchman whose subtly imitative method of criticism Mr. Thompson himself did so much to further in English. “Fluent impressionism” was exactly what he himself dealt in, when he was discussing for our illumination the writers of young France; and, as between two methods of exposing an ego, justice shows that Mr. Thompson discovered always as much pose as personality.

If it must be pose, too, there is always the Max Beer-bohm pose; behind that, as behind his paradox, there is much sane philosophy, as was proven by the years which followed his first public posturing in prose and caricature. It is to him, indeed, that we are indebted for a

most entertaining caricature, in black and white, of Mr. Shaw, whereby, even if he had not himself given us much other criticism containing true creation, the historian of this period must take note of him.

As between two different methods in log-rolling, is there anything to choose between Shaw's and that in vogue here? Why not—instead of the insufferable advertisements telling fairy-tales in guise of statistics anent the newest “best sellers”; instead of the saccharine phrase-mongering of the panderers paid to pimp for publishers' advertisements; instead of the sedulous activities of the bureaus furnishing personal paragraphs about the public and private affairs of our authors;—why not the frank self-glorification of a G. B. S.? One thing is sure: the intellectual appeal in such advertising would go up notably. Remembering what Heine and Walter Harte said, and what Shaw so clearly proved, authors would doubtless write far more readably about themselves than they now do about one another.

Perhaps—says sophistication—more authors do that very thing than we imagine? True;—perhaps—but they do not sign such stuff. It is the signature that gives it value and humor.

Is there a Don Quixote to step into this breach? Let him not be abashed by what those fine swashbuckling Irishmen, Wilde and Shaw and Moore—(if you mislike the phrase for Wilde, remember the swashbuckler could use rapier as well as broadsword!)—have done; the American field is quite virgin for candor; let him take heart; he will have no competition on this side the Atlantic! The wilderness of hypocrisy is so dense that the question is whether any ever so doughty egoist could ever blaze a path through. Certainly the combination of Truth and Ego has seldom been tried in America; it killed Walter Harte. Not one of those careers in England and the European continent that we are now con-



sidering would have been attended, in America, with anything save disenchantment.

In a moment of madness one might, perhaps, throw discretion to the winds; begin to tell, without reserve, the story of one's life. . . . But, no; the case of Harte comes too readily to mind; let us beware of too premature a death; our literature and our publishers have surely victims enough.

Besides—there is an insuperable objection: I am no Irishman. So dies the dream of being another D'Arctagnan.

So far I had written in 1901.

How far the world has come, since then, in appreciation of G. B. S. is notorious enough.

Only upon his being essentially a critic, whatever art-form he may choose, would I still lay stress. Always he had socialist criticisms on life or letters to make. Whether in "Mrs. Warren's Profession" or "Widowers' Houses" he tilted at the hypocrisies in our civilisation, or in other plays analysed the Irish character, in yet others posed the problem of "tainted money"—nothing he wrote was ever anything but criticism. Always he was reading Society a lecture, giving our consciences a shock. While our newspapers were revelling in inartistic journalese, or our novelists writing "muck-raking" novels, about this or that plutocratic crime, Shaw was writing entertaining plays that brought the problems out far more clearly, and entertained our intelligence into the bargain. What Ouida said years ago, Shaw repeated, when he declared, in "Major Barbara," that "the State is constantly forcing the consciences of men by violence and cruelty." Is there grotesque laughter at coupling of Ouida and Shaw? Read, then, the shorter Italian tales of Ouida; read, therewith, the serio-comic sermons on life which Shaw put in terms of the theatre, and if you do not see that Mlle. de la Ramee and our

Irishman were, to use a phrase of his own, fellow-"connoisseurs in irony," it will be because your sight is obscured by your prejudices.

Shaw's sight, as we have already seen, was never obscured. It is interesting to recur to that, since it brings up a curious parallel between him and that other idol-smasher whose impress on our thought has been so strong: Friederich Nietzsche.

Shaw told this of a visit to his oculist:

"He tested my eyesight one evening, and informed me that it was quite interesting to him because it was 'normal.' I naturally took this to mean that it was like everybody else's; but he rejected this construction as paradoxical, and hastened to explain to me that I was an exceptional and highly fortunate person optically, normal sight conferring the power of seeing things accurately, and being enjoyed by only about ten per cent. of the population, the remaining ninety per cent. being abnormal."

Compare that with the following revelation made about Nietzsche by Henry L. Mencken:

"As a matter of fact it was his abnormally accurate vision and not a vision gone awry, that made him stand so aloof from his fellows."

So, with both these men, their individual clearness of sight, mental as well as physical, distinguished them from their fellows, and marked them as targets for the suspicion of the average intelligence. Only a magnificent physique and an unquenchable Celtic humor enabled Shaw to conquer the allied stupidities of the Anglo-Saxon world; lacking both the physique and the humor, Nietzsche succumbed as to his body; but his terrific philosophy, flung like a comet into interstellar spaces, shines on eternally. Its influence permeates thought in the twentieth century; call it original or not, it is there. Consciously or unconsciously he voiced that triumph of

analysis and of the individual which elsewhere such men as G. B. Shaw, and W. S. Gilbert—differing from him only in the possession of humor—had put into plays and stories. Nietzsche found German philosophy based on formula, precedent and convention. False premises, rotten statutes, and outworn creeds were everywhere. He saw that an axe would have to be laid to the root of it all. So, with his wonderful courage, his keen analysis and his fascinating style, he began that warfare which kept him busy for the rest of his short life—that fight to prove that good and evil were relative terms, and that no human being had any right to judge or direct the actions of another.

How closely acceptance follows new thinking you may see if you compare with that general thesis of Nietzsche the countless so-called epigrams made within recent years on the text that Morals are entirely a matter of Geography. If, off-hand, you had been told that such cynicisms—such plain phrasing of clear seeing—whether accredited to a Talleyrand, a Swift or an Oscar Wilde—were nothing but Nietzsche in solution, you would have doubtless been surprised. But the evidence is there. More than that, if you would see how close may run the phrases of a Gilbert and a German philosopher, the epigrams of an Irishman and the axioms of a sham-smashing Teuton, you have only to observe the following parallel. The theory of it is entirely my own; I stand ready to be refuted, but I do not believe any other writer has pointed it out.

Namely, the affinity between Nietzsche and Gilbert.

Gilbert, W. S. Gilbert, the author of the only English librettos that are also literature? You say you do not see the connection? Well, let us see. There was at least a decade or two, was there not, when Gilbertian phrases were as current among us as are now the newest atrocities in slang? You grant that? Very well. Now, Nietzsche having been dead some years, it is presumable

that even the most flippantly minded Americans have passed beyond the stage when they supposed his name stood for a sort of influenza; indeed, they cannot well have escaped the knowledge that the word Superman, popularised by a play of Shaw's, is of Nietzsche origin. What is the notion of a Superman (an Uebermensch), or of what is implied in the title of his first important philosophic work, "*Menschliches Allzu Menschliches*," but the identical idea which Gilbert put into his caustic lines touching the "too too utterly"?

From the libretto of "*Patience*" (that opera which set to music the esthetic craze of Wilde) to the philosophy of Nietzsche may seem a far cry, but it is entirely my own; I make it in reaffirming a phenomenon which has marked all ages: the spontaneous growth of great ideas in great men showing everywhere at identical periods, though many miles and all possible barriers of language intervene.

Independence of thought, in all ages, has marked, has made, or has destroyed the great man. Time was when we smiled at all implied in the "too too utter"; to-day we talk of the Superman. Gilbert-Nietzsche; Nietzsche-Gilbert; there is the pendulum of ideas.

Of Shaw the dramatic critic the general reading public was finally made aware by two volumes of his "*Dramatic Opinions and Essays*," to which reference has already been made. You have been told how he vowed he never would rehash his journalistic feats, and then, after all, allowed it to be done. The world at large doubtless for the first time realised the critic in him when it saw these books; to the discriminating nothing from his pen was ever anything else than criticism.

These volumes of dramatic opinions of his (which might easily be equaled by books of his on music and painting) were equally valuable as a Guide to Shaw and to the theatrical period they covered. If we had not in

the many familiar Prefaces gained our impression of this author, and of his sufferings on the hard floors of the picture galleries, the foul air and false art of the theatre, we would have gained them vividly enough in that printed picture of Shaw the Dramatic Critic of the late 'Nineties. On the three years of the English theatre between 1895 and 1898 these pages threw such bright illumination that the light fell actually upon the whole art of English drama during the last decade of the nineteenth century.

In this memorably fine personal chronicle of an English dramatic period so many details were notable that I cannot possibly point out anything save what helps the main argument in my book. Still, I must interpolate here that all those Shaw pages on "Borkmann" and on Echegaray affected me with ironic poignancy, since—as you may remember—I was of those who, ten years ago, striking twelve an hour before noon, first introduced to New York, by way of the *Criterion Independent Theatre*, both the Ibsen play and "El Gran Galeoto." Also, you should note that Shaw did not expect anyone to be wise enough to produce "Peer Gynt" in English before 1920; Mr. Mansfield, by advancing that event fourteen years, unintentionally repaid some of his debt, as actor, to Mr. Shaw as artist.

"A literary play," Shaw remarked, "is a play that the actors have to act; in opposition to the acting play, which acts them." That is but one specimen of the common-sense which this critic constantly used for our illumination and for the discomfiture of the incompetent in art. The frequency and vigor of his denunciations of the manner in which our modern players pretend to master in a season the art of the stage—which Talma declared to be a matter of at least twenty years—has been equaled on his own side of the water only by George Moore, and on our side only by Charles Frederic Nirdlinger.



Shaw, as critic, gave one of the sanest verdicts upon Wilde that you may find anywhere. He characterised him, in that period of the 'Nineties, as, in a certain sense, England's "only playwright. He plays with everything: with wit, with philosophy, with drama, with actors and audience, with the whole theatre." A summing up which we can apply as logically to G. B. S. himself; he has played his game quite as fantastically as the other Irishman; you have only to recall "Arms and the Man" to see how deliberately he made fun of his public over the footlights.

When Shaw comes to enunciation of his conception of the critic's province he is so completely in accord with what I have insisted on often enough for literature, that in sheer glee I cannot refrain from quotation. "It is the business of the dramatic critic to educate the dunces, not to echo them," he declared, which I hold to be even more necessary in my own art. Again, "The artist's rule must be Cromwell's: Not what they want, but what is good for them." I commend these various formulas to our professors whose spines are well-oiled for ushering in the countless incompetents. "A dramatic critic is really the servant of a high art, and not a mere advertiser of entertainments of questionable respectability of motive." There, again, you may elide the word "dramatic" and hold the sentence true. "The actor who desires enduring fame must seek it at the hands of the critic, and not of the casual playgoer," is a thought which, translated to apply to literature, holds equally good. And finally this, applicable most surely to all the arts:

"As the respect inspired by a good criticism is permanent, whilst the irritation it causes is temporary, and as, on the other hand, the pleasure given by a venial criticism is temporary and the contempt it inspires permanent, no man really

secures his advancement as a dramatist by making himself despised as a critic."

I wonder if the average American critic really knows what that sentence means?

The true test of criticism, from any sane viewpoint, is whether, after the duty to the subject has been fulfilled, it is as fascinating to the uninitiated as to the devotee of the art in question. Shaw's criticism always stood that test. Everything he did, whether in lecture, or play, or story, or essay, was always criticism; and nothing that he did, in whatever disguise, but was full of fascination, not only upon men of letters and habitual playgoers, but on those who intrinsically cared for no art save that of being entertained.

Infinitely amusing, unflaggingly sane, was Bernard Shaw. But whom can we name in any of the arts to equal him on this side of the water? Where shall we find an American equivalent to this clear flashing of Irish wit and criticism?

Quite aside from our Irish trio, Wilde, Shaw and Moore, what critic of the theatre has New York had in our time to compare, for general worth and general appreciation, to that of William Archer, A. B. Walkley, J. T. Greive, and G. S. Street? Does London, do you think, know the name of more than, say, one serious American critic of the drama?

Say what you please about criticism—call it as often as you like the lament of impotent aspiration—the fact remains that only through the vigor of its criticism may you discern the health of an art. American dramatic criticism has been as lamentably lacking as criticism of literature. There was Mr. Laurence Hutton, who prattled about the death-masks of famous players; and there was Mr. William Winter, who, to be sure, could write as

robustly as any Shaw or Moore at rare intervals in the New York *Tribune*, but whose books upon the theatre were nothing but a welter of weeping. I know but two American writers who have attempted real literature in criticism in the domain of the theatre: James Huneker and Charles Frederic Nirdlinger.

If in many directions Mr. Shaw and Mr. Huneker kept parallel—(both have been critics of music, of the drama, and of painting)—the published books of Mr. Huneker deal with the foreign drama more than with our own. Moreover, aside from the remarkable manner in which Mr. Huneker has patterned his critical career upon the versatile method of Shaw, it is as a musical critic that I prefer to introduce him, so that I must delay his case until George Moore has been touched upon.

That leaves us, then, one single critic of the drama, Charles Frederic Nirdlinger. Between Shaw's "Dramatic Opinions" and Mr. Nirdlinger's "Masques and Mummings" there was the practical similarity that both definitely covered certain periods in the theatre of England and America. Since no other American critic of this calibre has become equally conspicuous, Mr. Nirdlinger's single volume is all that we have in candid and memorable discussion upon the drama in America at the end of the last century. As that drama was largely English, you see how the books touch at many points. Upon the contrasting merits of Bernhardt and Duse we have Mr. Nirdlinger's fine chapter on "Signora's Art and Madam's Antics," while Shaw wrote upon the heels of Bernhardt's antics: "I shall certainly not treat her as a dramatic artist of the first rank unless she pays me well for it." Vastly at odds as were the styles of Mr. Nirdlinger and Mr. Shaw—the former writing with a classic formality denoting the early Greek scholar and occasionally straining for the strange word, while the latter kept us agape at his colloquial candor, his impudent recklessness in thought and expression—in orig-

inality, in serious desire for reform and freedom from conventions, these two critics bore each other appreciable resemblance. As Shaw had declared that in an exhibition of clothes worn by popular actors he would undertake to point out at sight the individual for which each sartorial expression stood, so did Mr. Nirdlinger once propound the pleasant theory that the actors really need never be named on the programme!

Slight as is that one volume of Mr. Nirdlinger's, it is all we have to contrast against the wealth of foreign criticism on the theatre. Therein the literature of the American stage received its first really vigorous and uncompromising contribution in criticism. "Masques and Mummery" was full of sturdy opinions, always forcibly, often persuasively, and even beautifully expressed. In this criticism of the theatre there was nothing of those qualities so dominant all about us: the pandering to players with whom the critic has supped, or being easy with managers of whom as playwright he had hopes. In fact—what with the general barrenness of the field to-day; what with the critics of the *Nym Crinkle* period never having cared to let even their least venal light shine for posterity; and with Mr. Winter having preferred to save for "covers" only the most harmless specimens of his often robust and brilliant criticism—Mr. Nirdlinger is to be hailed as having first raised dramatic criticism in America to the level of permanent literature.

While it was by way of Shaw that we came to observance of Mr. Nirdlinger as critic, we cannot, since the latter himself calls attention to the book, avoid noting how much there is in common between George Moore's famous essay on "Mummer Worship" and the author of "Masques and Mummery." The American, though no less forceful and brave than Moore in his opinions, displayed a more Attic elegance of language, and a wider

sweep of strictly theatric experience. Yet the main end in all his critical work was to prove that the literary and not the mechanical side of drama is what counts. The play, and not the player, is considerable; that is the text of this book. It was not, in fine, a book to please what is known as the Rialto in New York. The scholar, the man about town, the person of taste in every walk of life, could not escape the charm in these critical pages; but not the actor. For the pivot on which Mr. Nirdlinger's whole scheme of criticism turned, the hook on which he hung philippic after philippic against the prevailing drama and criticism in the American theatre, is revealed in this:

“The performance of a playwright is the product of intelligence, presumably; the performance of an actor is nothing of the sort, necessarily. Playmaking is an art; acting merely an accident. The man qualified to make a play of any considerable merit is generally a person of sufficient mental training, moral calm and esthetic impersonality to comprehend the purpose of criticism and appreciate its spirit. Not so the actor, whose calling requires an egotism, vanity and temperamental immodesty that construe analysis into a personal insult. Finally, too, the playwright is capable of profiting by the lessons and intimations of his censors. But the actor . . .”

The student of style should find satisfaction in Mr. Nirdlinger's pages, inasmuch as his writing is unmistakably that of one on whom Latin and Greek have left their mark. The result is often a preciosity to delight the intelligent while confounding the untutored. Of certain somewhat cryptic syllables, it is true, this critic was a trifle overenamored; such words as “trope,” “ambiguency” and “pudicity” occur with remarkable “frequency”; but even such details as these go to the making of that rare bird, a stylist. Certainly, slight as the pub-



lished volume of his critical work, Mr. Nirdlinger has deserved well of the American drama and its literature. He was a real critic, in a land where you must search for them harder than Diogenes.

Yet, quite aside from the slight volume of critical writing by a Nirdlinger as against the considerable volume our trio of Irishmen gave us in the same period, if you will compare his position, his renown, against theirs, you will see the force of my argument that American criticism is but a puny plant on ungrateful soil.

Who, among the multitudes reading only newspapers, ever heard of Mr. Nirdlinger the critic? They heard once of Clement Scott, perhaps; they may have heard of Mr. William Archer and his views on Ibsen; or they may recall that Mr. A. B. Walkley was once refused entrance to a London theatre by an actor. But an American critic of that rank—no; the only criticism they know is that used on the billboards.

Coming lower in the scale of comparison, admitting that the fame of Wilde, and Shaw and Moore far overtops anything possible to a critic on this side of the Atlantic, compare the case of the better sort of American dramatic critic with that of Mr. Walkley, whom, through the publication of his "Drama and Life," we may consider from the literary viewpoint. Mr. Walkley was no cleverer, no honester; but his position as critic of the London *Times*, his standing in the intellectual community, was of actual importance, while his American compeer was held merely to be rather a dangerous eccentric. Mr. Walkley was nothing wonderful; yet the sum total of his attitude was so intelligent, so cosmopolitan, that against our American average it loomed as the expression of a gentleman and a scholar. He maintained a decent mean between brilliance and seriousness. He indulged in much comparison between the French and the English

theatre; devoted many pages to Shaw; a chapter to the Irish National Theatre; and two to the dancing of Adeline Genée. When Mr. Walkley forecast the day when drama will vanish since "exact knowledge of reality" will have made *acting* impossible, he had in mind the same fundamental thought which brought Mr. Nirdlinger to argue for the anonymity of actors.

In Mr. Walkley, too, we could trace that Nietzsche influence so evident in Shaw. But differently expressed. What Walkley transformed to his own use was the doctrine that players never arrive at the actual spirit, never grasp more than slightly the real soul, of the figures they portray; that they never penetrate beyond exteriors. It was on that same theory, unconscious of Nietzsche, that the satire in "The Imitator" was based; and how little even a genius of drama may help in solving that problem of personality you will have seen in my pages upon Mr. Richard Mansfield.

What was Nietzsche, indeed, but the Machiavelli of our time? Machiavelli, like those others, Nietzsche and G. B. S., saw things normally, as they were; he did not confuse his vision with notions as to how things ought to be.

To Mr. Walkley's castigation of Pinero for his "dictionary English" I have already referred in an earlier chapter.

Here, then, is my point: taking merely an average case of critical intelligence—as Mr. Walkley's—in England, you still find a more acknowledged and powerful success than if you take the most distinguished example America can produce.

What, against the trio I have chosen to do battle for criticism abroad, is one such as Charles Frederic Nird-

linger? Whatever he may count in originality, in honesty and in style—in the scale of commercialism, omnipotent to-day, he counts as an almost negligible instance.

Which, surely, is something we could say nor of Wilde, nor of Shaw, nor of George Moore.

The last-named writer remains to be considered.

## CHAPTER TEN

FROM the time when the critical impertinence in "The Confessions of a Young Man" first astonished the English-speaking world George Moore has been one of the most interesting figures in the world of art. He has varied his formulas, changed his artistic medium; he has written autobiographically and critically as well as in the play and narrative forms; but to me he has always been paramount as critic. In his novels he has criticised life and paint and music; in his other books he threw illumination on those same subjects, and on his own artistic self as well. However swiftly and briefly we review Mr. Moore's career we must, I think, emerge always with our view of him as critic strengthened. There were a number of early novels of his full of Zola and a sort of sensationalism but slightly redeemed by their bravado; in books of criticism more serious than the "Confessions" he made all the art-loving world, conscious enough now of Whistler and Manet and Degas, his debtors, and enraged all the actors by his views on "Mummer Worship"; he wrote militantly for Independent Theatres; he devoted himself and some fiction to his native Irish country and character and language; he wrote novels which many regard as the finest serious fiction in English which modern music has stimulated; and he continued, after a twenty years' interval, those confessions of self which he had contributed to the general entertainment in the 'Eighties.

Never, for one moment of his many fine artistic achievements, was he greater than as a critic of the arts. You may include in that, if you like, the art of life; for he never saw life save through the eye of the immitigable artist.

Never has the melancholy Irish soul had more perfect expression than in George Moore. The Irishman's wit, his quality of sprite or elf, we found in Shaw, and in Wilde; not in Moore. The Celtic quicksilver was in all three. To put it in terms simply human: as long as you did not depend on them, all was well enough. To-day they laughed; to-morrow cried. One day Wilde sneered at sincerity; the next, in prison, he preached a sermon on Christ that no minister of the gospel ever surpassed for beauty. One day Moore denounced the Christian influence on the world; the next he was writing novels which for description of Catholicism in England and Ireland are supreme in their kind.

Yes—the melancholy Irish soul. . . .

Do you know the portrait of Moore by Walter Sickert? You will see, there, that melancholy, the same melancholy, I think, that was in the face of Walter Pater, who was Dutch rather than Celt.

But it was not melancholy that stared at you boldly from the pages of the "Confessions of a Young Man," the pages which introduced Moore to this generation. It was impertinence, impressionism, paganism, Celto-Gallic frankness, a number of things foreign and refreshing to our Anglo-Saxon artistic respectabilities; but it was not melancholy. Who, that is worth his salt in the literary vineyard to-day, but recalls delightedly that first succumbing to the impudent, alluring charm of that book?

What clearer argument need there be for the advantages of personality and prejudice in criticism than the survival of this early crime of Moore's youth? Where, now, are the many burrowings into academic formulas which saw the light, as books, at that same period?

With the "Confessions" Moore definitely began that career in which he now looms so fine a figure; he became a Man of Letters. It is in that book we may find the germs of all that he has since given us: his interest in



paint, in fiction, in music and in the theatre was first formally exposed in that volume, with the swagger of youth, but also with the fascination of an artist whom even a style rotten with French idiom could but slightly hamper. What was hinted in that book he later expanded in plays and criticisms and stories; to measure that first impertinent but appealing bit of literature now, in any solemn serious way, is as if we judged a play by the "synopsis" printed on the programme. Yet one of those apparent impertinences was, I remember, recalled to me by something Ambrose Bierce wrote very soberly ten years later; and, if only to show that behind the impertinences of George Moore—as behind the paradox of Wilde or of Max Beerbohm—there was often sound philosophy, the incident is of value.

Inveighing against education Moore had written:

"A good, honest, well-to-do peasant, who knows nothing of politics, must be very nearly happy;—and to think there are people who would educate, who would draw these people out of the calm satisfaction of their instincts, and give them passions! The philanthropist is the Nero of modern times."

Against that, put this, written by Ambrose Bierce in February, 1897, some ten years later:

"The only man that labors with a song in his heart is he that knows nothing but to labor. Give him education—enlarge by ever so little the scope of his thought—make him accessible to a sense of the pleasures of life and his own privations, and you set up a quarrel between him and his condition. . . ."

I have always thought the essay from which that is quoted should be printed separately, in pamphlet form, in sufficient numbers so that one might be posted daily to Mr. Carnegie for the term of his natural life. . . . For Mr. Carnegie is most militant in that campaign, to

compel our literary uplifting, which has as war-cry the one word "More!" indefinitely repeated.

What Mr. Moore had promised in criticism of the arts through his "Confessions" he memorably kept in those two volumes, still the best in their sort that our period has produced, "Modern Painting" and "Impressions and Opinions." In the latter appeared much about the theatre (including the essay on Mummer-Worship); some literature (in which first we realised Mr. Moore's devotion to Balzac, whom he ever preferred to Shakespeare, and in which first we heard of Verlaine); and a good deal of art criticism. What Moore there wrote about Art for the Villa, and about Degas, remains to-day as among the prophetic suggestions by which the twentieth century has profited, not only artistically, but materially; for you may easily compute what in twenty years has been the enhancement in value of a painting by Whistler, by Degas, by Manet; and whenever you admire the newer realisms of our younger Americans, as G. B. Luks, or W. Glackens or Ernest Lawson, you owe a debt of gratitude to Moore's critical illumination of the way into the future.

Throughout, and above all else, Moore, critically straying about among the arts for our entertainment and instruction, was unfalteringly readable. With anecdote, with manifold personal, intimate touches, he amused us; he wrote as one having many moods, many tongues, the which he adapted always to his subject; long before Ernest Le Jeunesse and Vance Thompson he adopted for criticism that subtle immersion in subject, that distillation of the very essence of the thing criticised, which we know as Parody. He gave us the very air, the very look, the very voice, of the artists upon whom he riveted our attention.

And that matter of parody brings me to the slight critical mention due Mr. Vance Thompson. If we can con-

sider him only parenthetically—as an incident in the larger view of George Moore—that is but another evidence of the lightness of American criticism in any international scale. In serious vein or flippant, this holds true.

Wider though the field of strictly literary observation in Mr. Vance Thompson's "French Portraits" was, his impress on the reader was less permanent than that of Moore's "Confessions." The "Portraits" was, perhaps, half as large again as the other book; yet it had less life and actuality; perhaps the very lack of humor of which one accuses Moore kept him from the somewhat acrobatic posturings of the American.

Has it ever been your fortune, as you wandered through the famous places and palaces of Europe, to have as guide one of those elaborate mimics who pose, always, in the very air, the tone, the attitude that fits the subject? Mark Twain did not show us this tribe; nor, as I remember, has anyone else. But it exists. When these fellows take you through the galleries of Florence they assume something of the figure of those old splendors which cover the walls; when they discover Rome for you they almost wear a toga. At Monte Carlo they are gamblers; on Capri they are fishermen; and in Nuernberg they are Goths.

Well, that was the method of the young man who presented to us, with a somewhat ironic politeness, certain "French Portraits." He implied, though he did not actually say so, that he has appreciated these writers of young France and of Belgium, and he would have us know that, in so appreciating, he himself was not the least of the persons deserving applause. He postured, for our benefit, and the gaining of our admiration, in all the manners of those whom he expounded. At the end of the book it is a question whether we remembered most the writers introduced, or him who had been so

spectacular a showman. He was like the ringmaster in the circus, whose immaculate ego and habit so outshone his surroundings that we saw nothing of the equestrianism he pretended to superintend. All of which was rather a pity.

Those French writers were indubitably of interest; the history of those artistic movements, fantastic as many of them were, had to be written in one way or another. The English-reading world may find many reasons for thanking the author of "French Portraits" in that he brought it close to men prominent in what some considered an epoch-making period of continental letters. He wrote of each man in the manner of that man; to that extent he gave us a superficial intimacy with those writers which a more sober critic could not have furnished. Yet it was several pities there was so much of Mr. Vance Thompson in his "French Portraits."

Gracefully as Mr. Thompson wove a hundred Gallic little tricks into his use of the English language—(it were as unjust to deny his skill in that device, as it would be impossible to deny the awkward effect of French idiom on Mr. Moore's early English)—it was impossible to keep patience with those vocative appeals of his to the reader, those "Eh, golden lads!" and "Dear Lord!" and "It's a devil of a thing to have been young once!" This trick of saying "My dear fellow" every now and again, as if, in Mr. Thompson's peculiar cant, all the world was "sib to my soul," was somewhat cheap, and somewhat sickening. The truth of the matter was that Mr. Thompson had chosen to lose himself as completely as possible in imitation of his subjects. If they sang songs to their souls, so did he; if they put triple dots upon their i's, why, so did he.

Whether Mr. Thompson would have done this if Ernest La Jeunesse had not also done it is an inveigling question. Mr. Thompson writes of Paul Adam being "a victim of his vocabulary," and of Catulle Mendés being

the "chameleon of letters" who "sold his soul for the beautiful phrase." Substitute "fantastic" for "beautiful" in that last sentence, and you have the vices of Mr. Thompson himself—as also (if you recall my earlier chapter) of Mr. Edgar Saltus.

Mr. Thompson was too much the chameleon; you searched in vain for the real person behind those manifold poses; you came to nothing distinctive save a passion for some none too happy words, as "inutile," "fictive," and "gracile girls." It is true that to differ from the majority may be a praiseworthy ambition; but when your difference becomes a formula it is as distressing as any other convention.

Once upon a time there was a writer who declared that criticism was a great soul's adventures among masterpieces. That phrase was the making of Mr. Thompson's somewhat gauzy critical cloak. He could not tell us of a new poet without mentioning the gentleman's soul, or what that soul thought about other souls. We learned what Maeterlinck's soul was like, and the soul of Maurice Barres, and Jean Moreas, and Jehan Rictus, and a number of other lyric creatures who went soulfully through the French and Belgian foreground. We learned, over and over again, the varying ways in which those artists put the formula of Jules Renard: "What I am, I write. What I write is me. It is not art. It is not life. It is myself." And over all the themes we heard the main melody of the whole book, which was that Mr. Vance Thompson had a most admirably appreciative soul, and that what he wrote was himself, that his parodic style was his Ego, his I. Ah, yes; but what, then, is he? An echo? A mirror? A manner? An American? A Scot? A Parisian?

We need not deny that the field opened to us was new and fresh with flowers. We were introduced to many strange and unheard of artists. Besides the familiar



figures of Verlaine, Mallarmé, Mendés, Maeterlinck and Verhaeren, were such men as Adolph Rette, Francis Jammes, Paul Fort and Marcel Schwob. Had we been able to forget the lecturer for a moment, the lecture was instructive enough. All the 'Isms that rioted through literary France in the last two decades were discovered in this book. It was a splendid compendium for the people who want just superficial information enough to pose as "advanced."

M. Ernest La Jeunesse parodied his contemporaries, and Mr. Thompson followed his example. His parodies of style were no finer than those of Mr. Barry Pain; though more dexterity may be needed in mimicking a foreign manner. Oh, it was all dexterous enough, brilliant enough, intimate enough; but—it was all keyed on the key of the Ego, all addressed to the other poseurs who pretended that Soul and Art must be written in capitals, and only too seldom was it matter that the normal human being could stomach. Only too seldom were there passages of simplicity and information, as when we were told that it was Marcel Schwob who introduced Stevenson and Meredith to French readers, or when we learned that it was Mallarmé who discovered Cheret, prince of poster-artists, and caused Whistler's masterpiece to be hung in the Luxembourg, and fostered Maeterlinck. (As to the latter detail, however, it may not do to believe our informant; there are far more authentic documents to prove that it was to Octave Mirbeau we owed our first familiarity with Maeterlinck. Which inaccuracy, moreover, is perhaps typical of the slight actuality under all this brilliant critical fiction of Mr. Thompson's.) Many of the intimate morsels of personal interest, whether authentic or not, are by no means in the nicest taste; we can find neither joy at hearing that Flaubert was wont to take off his shoes when dining, nor admiration for our informant. We may have known that the world whispered of a liaison between Robert Louis Stevenson and

opium, but we cannot love the gossip who disseminates the whisper.

If we wished to descend to the level of mere malicious gossip, might we not aver that Mr. Vance Thompson was a Scotchman of American experience who saw life through a monocle—a Parisian who spoke with an Aberdeen accent?

The book was part criticism, part parody, and part unconscious autobiography. What it did in the domain of literature, a later book of the same author's attempted in another domain. "Diplomatic Mysteries" was not history; it was not fiction; it was once again merely an intimate excursion with Mr. Thompson. If you were genially minded you could say it was history as it ought to have happened to be artistic. The artist in Mr. Thompson had deftly improved on the actual and the accounts of it. Where once he had taken us by the arm and bade us note his familiarity with certain arriving and arrived Frenchmen of letters, he now introduced us magnificently and intimately with some of the most famous persons in Europe. . . . Shade of Corelli, avaunt! Avaunt, Hall Caine!

Again the snob who is in all too many Americans of the Atlantic Coast was deftly appealed to. Once he was made free of the young kings of French literature; now he was made hail-fellow-well-met with kings, and diplomats, and many potent men behind the great events of recent history. Was there not a fascination in the notion of knowing as intimately the secret motives of emperors and ministers as you know, by the newspapers, how the most recently notorious jailbird dined last night? Above all, was it not an indubitably brilliant afternoon or evening one had spent with the talented author himself?

Talented? Oh, immensely talented; immensely clever. But—in more than the usual fatal modern degree—some-

what the victim of his own cleverness. Touching many things brilliantly; but remaining rather a journalist than a man of letters. Nowhere, so far, is there a serious achievement to his credit; nowhere more than much scintillant, superficial, and infrequently original stuff. . . . I believe, for my part, there is brawn in him as well as brilliance; if he would put the monocle and the mannerisms out of his writing . . . who knows? . . .

(My objection to the monocle has nothing to do with the average American distrust of it as an affectation. There is a more intimate reason. Mr. Gardner Teall once sent me a portrait, monocled, of a person who resembled myself. To my remonstrance that I never wore such a thing, he retorted, simply:

“No; but you should!” Which I have ever preferred to regard more as a revelation of Mr. Teall than of myself.)

It was, at any rate, impossible not to mention Mr. Thompson when the parodic manner in criticism was in mention.

As for the mere buffoonery of it, the impertinence, the pose, surely that adopted by Max Beerbohm—if we keep, for comparisons, somewhere below the giants—was more admirable than that of Vance Thompson! Behind that elaborately poised mask of wit, and that exaggerated egoism, real wisdom and really critical philosophy were always apparent. What has Mr. Shaw ever written to confute Beerbohm’s keen jibe that “if he would have his ideas realised the Socialist must first kill the Snob”? No; if it is to be a race to see which is the cleverer, Beerbohm dead-heats with La Jeunesse rather than Thompson, for like the Frenchman he is as deft in caricature as in posed prose; and if it be a question of the philosophy behind the posturing—the Englishman wins from both the Frenchman and the American. As for mere precious phrases, what did Vance Thompson ever

write to equal that sentence in which Max Beerbohm mentioned the ghost-tenanted windows of St. James's Square? "From one," he said, "Nell Gwyn waved her naughtily embellished fingers."

Her naughtily embellished fingers! What pomp and pageant of the primrose path came out at bidding of that single phrase! The world is full of books not worth those three words.

The doctrine which Moore expressed in his essay on Mummer-Worship he carried, some years later, into several volumes of important fiction. With the novels preceding his "Vain Fortune"; with much direct critical writing, and some play-writing; we cannot now linger; it was not until, in 1898, he wrote "Evelyn Innes" that the world had to admit him as a great novelist, a great critic of life as well as of the arts.

In "Evelyn Innes" Moore did various notable things. What John Oliver Hobbes had done for man, in his two books about Robert Orange, Moore here began to do about woman; in the sequel, "Sister Teresa," he completed his study of catholicism and music and the human soul. The book came at a period when there had been much written on similar subjects in English; not to refer again to the negligible contributions by Mrs. Humphrey Ward and Marie Corelli, there had been John Davidson's fine "Ballad of a Nun." That, with the four novels named just now, undoubtedly belongs among the social documents necessary to the historian of the English peoples. Mrs. Craigie showed the monastic man; Moore the passionate singer who became a nun.

Without concerning ourselves overmuch with one story, the tragedy in "Evelyn Innes," there were plenty of musical and emotional details in those pages which gave them permanent value for the student of psychology, of passion, and of criticism. We saw a man who was an agnostic, a man of forty, attuning to himself the soul of

a young girl who above all was a great singer, a great actress. Just as it was a moving story of a passionate woman's struggle against conscience, so was it the tragedy of a man of forty. As Balzac immortalised the Woman of Thirty, so did Moore here try to illumine the Man of Forty. Those passionate days in Paris, and in Florence, were as near Balzac as anything in English. How far Moore had come from the days when he first wrote novels intended merely to shock the English became evident as we noted that in "Evelyn Innes" the insistence was always on the spiritual side. In all that story of a liaison, of this great singer who was admittedly "the most adorable mistress in Europe," there was little of the fleshly; only the most admirable of artistic reticence, of elucidation of the spiritual, of emphasis on analysis of conscience. What Sudermann had somewhat uncouthly sketched in "Magda," Moore made more modern, more cosmopolitan; here was the mercilessness of a hair-line etching.

If ever there was a story which the millionaire protagonists of Wagnerian music at our metropolitan opera houses should have taken wisdom from, it is "Evelyn Innes." Neither confession nor the convent really quenched in this singer the passion which an inherited emotionalism had sown in her and continual mimic imitation of Wagnerian heroines had increased. With fierce insistence this novelist pictured the completeness with which this woman lost herself in her Wagnerian rôles of passionate life. "In her stage life she was an agent of the sensual passion, not only with her voice, but with her arms, her neck, her hair, and every expression of her face, and it was the craving of the music that had thrown her into Ulick's arms. . . ."

Grim enough stuff, this, for the defenders of the stage to swallow. Voicing the arguments in the essay already referred to his heroine here admits: "I could not be a good woman and remain on the stage, that's what it



comes to." He does not even allow that the few virtuous women on the stage are a redeeming feature; even they "set a bad example for the very knowledge of their virtues tempts others less sure of themselves to engage in the same life, and these weak ones fall. The virtuous actress is like a false light, which instead of warning vessels from the rocks, entices them to their ruin."

And, as always, whether the books were labeled fiction or criticism, there was illumination on George Moore himself. This was sheer Moore, though voiced by one of his puppets:

"I never see Paris without thinking of Balzac. . . . The moment I begin to notice Paris, I think I feel, see and speak Balzac. . . . All interesting people are Balzacians."

Though all the color and passion in her life Evelyn exchanged for the cloister with its gray monotones, Moore did not long, in his sequel called "Sister Teresa," allow his readers to remain forgetful of her as a great singer and a splendid animal. Her vital characteristics remained an inveterate sensuality and a sincere aspiration for a spiritual life. With the conflict between the two this novel, like its earlier volume, was concerned. The earlier part of "Sister Teresa" so displayed a man and a woman in the large, the vital, not to say the undraped aspect, as to give the book a rare value in a literature where bluntness is the exception. In moments of depression, overcome by the conflict between the sensual and the spiritual in her, *Evelyn* considered herself fit only for the singing of operas and being a man's mistress; she inclined to believe the man who had assured her that the true romance of her life was the sexual instinct. Her struggles against memories of the operatic stage and her own fascinating womanhood—against what she once called "the sensual beast within her"—made

reading that must have been trying for the puritans. But the conflict was soon ended, so that the more sensitive readers did not, in their taste or their temper, have to suffer long. The moral idea in her triumphed; she gave up the life she had sickened of, the life of the great world, of the stage, of men, of music, and of desire.

With *Evelyn's* entry into the convent the book becomes the most complete guide to convent life that we have in our language. We had Huysmans; but I must not clog my argument with that comparison, so long the staff of many critics' lives. Elizabeth Jordan's "Tales of the Cloister" were merely impermanent essays in conventual fiction based on what in the conventual is most human.

It was perhaps a tribute to Moore's minuteness about that pale, gray, monotone of life in the convent, that the very reading intellect seemed numbed by mere perusal of it. We are spared as little as was Evelyn. She found, perhaps, the moral and the spiritual peace which she had sought; but as an individual she became effaced; intellectually she became an echo—where once, in all senses, she had been a Voice——; the convent wiped her brain as blank as you may wipe a slate. Here was a fine, a noble transcript of the fine, the noble life of conventual contemplation; but it left the heroine as utterly brainless as if, like the angel in an early story by H. G. Wells, she had been "pithed." What had been brain was now merely pith.

*Evelyn*, to the end, was merely a mummer. The convent was merely another stage for her. Mr. Moore's thoughts upon the life of the human soul were very beautiful; but they were never Evelyn's.

Always it was the adventure of Mr. Moore's own soul in the music and the color of life that was valuable in his art.

If in "Evelyn Innes" and "Sister Teresa" we saw him most clearly as a critic of music, and of the music of living, so in "The Lake" I found triumphant the old Adam of his art-critic period.

In "The Lake" George Moore revealed himself, even more than he had done in his volumes of criticism, autobiography and fiction, as pre-eminently enamored of the color and value of life from the painter's stand-point. Great as was this novel, above all its delicate portrayal of Irish character, above all the silhouettes of a priest and a music-mistress, rose the value of the landscape which dominated the author. The pathos and the beauty of the Irish scene were paramount; his characters were as obsessed by it as was his treatment of the whole theme. It was the lake that called from Mr. Moore his finest pages; it was the lake that revealed him as still inextinguishably the critic of art. Here, in essence, was compressed much of Irish scene and character that he had hinted in other stories; and here, matured by the years, was the same enthusiast for art who in the "Confessions" and the following books of criticism had so chained our regard. Here was recovered the brave polemic strain in "Impressions and Opinions." Mr. Moore was probably never quite so happy in his life as when his days were spent in arguing about pictures and painting. Never was he more Mooresque than when, as in "The Lake," he remonstrated against the accusation that Rubens was "a gross sensualist" who always chose to paint fat women; he averred that "underlying the voluptuous exterior there is a sadness in Rubens which only the attentive mind perceives." Which, essentially, is commentary on Moore, as much as on Rubens.

Note these salient sentences on Hals:

Hals, the maître d'armes of painting . . . whose wrist never slackens, over whose guard a thrust never comes

. . . faultless painting wearies one. Everything is so perfect that the pictures lack humanity. . . . Pictures of this kind reminded me too much of the inside of omnibuses. But his picture of the old women, a picture painted when he was eighty, is quite different. It is full of emotion and beauty. Hals seems to have grown tender and sentimental in his old age, or was it that he merely painted these old women to please himself, whereas he painted the burgo-masters at so much a head? There is no suspicion of the omnibus in the picture of the old women. He saw them together in the almshouse; they made a group, a harmony, and he was moved by the spectacle of the poor old women, fading like flowers, having only a few years to live—old women in their last shelter, an almshouse. He was at that time as old as any of his sitters, and the picture of the old men which he began immediately after was never finished. I suppose that one morning he felt unable to paint; he grew fainter and died.

The essential grace of all true criticism is there; it fascinates even a mind unconscious of concern with affairs artistic; it compels the attention of the mere outsider in esthetics. There we had Hals seen through the temperament of Moore; an Irishman's adventures amid a Dutchman's masterpieces. Whether directly in casual pages devoted to painting or indirectly in the themes of his stories, George Moore proved himself pre-eminently a critic of color and movement in the worlds of paint and tone and nature. He showed us all Holland in his few sentences about Ruysdael and Van der Meer, and Rembrandt. And it was as if he opened a window into his own soul when he wrote of a picture by Ruysdael that had "a gray sky deeper and soberer than any Irish sky—a real Protestant sky. Ruysdael must have been a Protestant. His pictures are even Calvinistic, or perhaps I should be nearer the truth if I said he was a great pessimist, attached to no particular doctrine."

As for story, in "The Lake," it was but his most familiar theme reversed. The effect, upon a simple, priestly

soul, of a woman, of Ireland—of the lake. Where *Evelyn* had been of the great sensual world, and had sought the convent, here was a soul immured in the gray pathos of an Irish parish, viewing sadly the yonder dream of free thought, free emotion, free life—and the dream, too, of fair women. *Evelyn* escaped from the world; the priest in this later story was to seek escape into it. Beside him, always listening to the counter-calls of the parish and the calls of the fair, far woman, was the Lake—seeing all, hearing all, knowing all. Knowing, even, what the priest would not admit to himself, namely, that it was the woman who sang loudest in his soul, the woman who, however distant, was the motiv in the opera of his life, “*Evelyn Innes*,” “*Sister Teresa*” and “*The Lake*” are a coherent trilogy, of life, of music, and of color.

Upon the note of “*The Lake*” I prefer to leave Mr. Moore. In many ways it is his high-water mark. His “*Memoirs of My Dead Life*” was a more mature repetition of a song called, in his youth, “*Confessions of a Young Man*”; it was as charming, though more melancholy and sensual than the earlier book. About the much discussed chapter on “*The Lovers of Orelay*” there is nothing profitable for Moore’s most genuine admirer; it is the art, and not the subject of those pages, that is at fault; the picture of Mr. Moore in despair because of his missing pajamas was too ridiculous not to cause laughter in even the hardest sympathiser with his amatory adventures. What was most memorable in the episode of that book’s several and differing editions was Mr. Moore’s Preface to the American version, that *Apologia Pro Scriptis Meis*, which belongs with the finest prefaces in the language, and with the finest essays on puritanism, whether by Moore himself, by Shaw, or by Walter Harte.

That passage, too, in which Mr. Moore, remarking the existence in English criticism of certain “falsetto voices”



reminding him of "gentlemen resident chiefly in Constantinople," must have entertained those who had laughed at what Gertrude Atherton had written in "The Aristocrats."

"The Lake" is the book so far most representative of Moore. It was a fine achievement in pictorial prose. His unwillingness to write graceful English had often been remarkable; over and beyond some slight canker of French idiom he had often indulged in harsh effects. In "Evelyn Innes" such phrases as "thin winter day," "naked Sunday streets" and "etiolated voices" could be excused as peculiarities of personal style; but such clauses as "the world had recalled memories and she wondered what were they," or "the music-room it seemed still to hold echoes of his voice" were nothing less than bad writing; while a reference to Pater's "Imaginary Conversations" (p. 382) was unpardonably careless. In "The Lake" there was nothing like that to distract from the sincerity of his theme, the absorption of his art in the colors of our present human period.

George Moore, at base, is an artist of melancholy. "The Lake" was eminently melancholy. We had youthful poses of his elsewhere; the mature and melancholy man was most essentially expressed in "The Lake."

It was of Moore, again, that the critic thought when he read, long after those early art appreciations in "Modern Painting" and elsewhere, those delightful pages in which the charming M. Octave Mirbeau once retold the miracle of Claude Monet's find in Zaandam. . . .

Another eminent man of letters, this Frenchman, M. Mirbeau, who has given us plays, and novels, and a little of everything in the domain of fine literature; whom we have to thank for discovering Maeterlinck, and for much else. Hidden away in a travel-volume of his—merely a story of just such a "Sentimental Journey in a Motor-

Car" as Otto Julius Bierbaum gave his German readers—is a deal of entertaining stuff on art, which, since it is in line with Moore and with all true cosmopolitan criticism, and out of line with the narrow limits of the American article, I must freely adapt.

In Brussels, M. Mirbeau found subjects for much keen artistic analysis, vent for much irony and entertaining spleen. He had described smilingly the French unwillingness to allow genius in other countries; Dickens, they declared, owed all to Daudet; Tolstoi was only Stendhal; Ibsen was taken bodily from Villiers de l'Isle Adam's *La Revolte*; Goethe, without Gounod and Thomas, had been nothing at all. . . . Then, of Camille Lemonnier, he observed that in his art he had been, one after another, de Musset, Byron, Victor Hugo, Zola, Chateaubriand, Edgar Poe, Ruskin, pre-raphaelite, romanticist, naturalist, symbolist and impressionist, winding up finally, in his old age, as disciple to the youthful St. Georges de Bonhelier. So that Belgian, if we believed M. Mirbeau, had surpassed even the chameleon moods of Mr. Vance Thompson.

Of the hatred M. Mirbeau conceived for Brussels, Anglo-Saxons may find quick appreciation. For Brussels persisted in talking to him or in his hearing of nothing but Paris and Art, Art and Paris. Wiertz, Gallais, Van Beers, Stevens, Knopff and Felicien Rops—the works of all these were spoiled for him by that persistent parrot-cry of Paris and Art, Art and Paris. Surely we too, on Manhattan Island, have often had our withers wrung by that refrain! Nor is Mr. George Moore himself quite guiltless of singing somewhat too much the siren-song in Charpentier's "Louise." . . .

But it is to the miracle that happened once in Zaandam, in Holland, that we must come; it is that page of M. Mirbeau's which brings him into this reference to George Moore and Claude Monet.

Claude Monet (I adapt freely from M. Mirbeau's in-

inimitable style) some fifty years ago was journeying through Holland. He was undoing a parcel of some absurd stuff or other. The parcel was wrapped in the first Japanese print he had ever seen. His emotion, his joy, his amazement, found vent in wordless phrases, in half-uttered cries. "Nom de Dieu! Ah, ah . . . nom de Dieu!" He could say no more; he could only look and look at the treasure of Zaandam, of Zaandam with its quay, its boats, its sombre garrets, its green houses, its ripples of water, its most Japanese aspect of all the towns in Holland. Here, inclosing his absurd trifle of a purchase, was his first glimpse of the Art of Japan, of that fine field of which now the names of Hokusai, of Outamaro and of Hiroshige are so familiar. Here was his first hint of the East, here awoke the first impetus toward the development of his own art, the art that now so many attempt with results so rarely equal to his.

M. Mirbeau figured for us Monet's sensations toward that unknown little grocer, who was doing up his dime's worth of coffee, or what not, in these glorious specimens of Oriental art. Monet, though then by no means rich, resolved to buy every single one of the masterpieces which the grocery-shop held. He watched the grocer, serving an old woman, seize one of the precious leaves. . . . He flung himself forward; "No, no, . . ." he cried, "I'll buy that . . . all of them, all . . . !" The grocer, good man, thought to humor this eccentric; these bits of colored paper had cost him nothing; as one gives a bauble to a crying child to appease it, he gave Monet the whole pile, smiling a little. "Take them," he said, "take them. That's all right; they're not worth anything; take them. This other paper is really much better. . . ." Turning to his customer, "No difference to you, eh?" "To me? Gracious, no!" He took some yellow wrapping paper, and handed the old woman her bit of cheese.

Monet, mad with joy, took his treasures home, spread

them out before him, the first of what was later to become a famous collection, and the real incentive to an evolution in French painting that belongs seriously to the history of nineteenth century art.

Surely that little story of M. Mirbeau's ranks with the stories of the same sort with which Moore regaled his readers.

It would be easy enough, in considering the fiction upon musical bohemianism which George Moore wrote, to refer to that whole shelf in the modern library which holds the stories told of "the artistic temperament." But that phrase, as well as "bohemianism," is long since flyblown, and only in the rarest instances has good art been achieved on those texts. Besides the music and mumming stories of Moore, Shaw, Claretie, Bierbaum, and Von Wolzogen all wrote novels already named. There were delightful stories in this sort in the earlier work of Henry Harland, and fantastic vagabondage was never more fascinatingly pictured than in W. J. Locke's "Beloved Vagabond." As Harland, an American, wrote always as if touched by a southern, Latin sun, finding his chief inspiration, eventually, in certain Anglo-Italian effects of the artistic temper, so did Locke write with a Gallic spirit, a quickness of whim, an allusiveness of phrase which in an Englishman was no less remarkable than the "Quattrocentisteria" of Maurice Hewlett.

The "artistic temperament"—the phrase had become abominable. When a young woman of more beauty than brains refused to abide by the salutary conventions society devised for its own health, we heard the apology that she had the artistic temperament. The modern Germans, leaning more and more toward Paris, even dropped half the phrase; when they see one of Beauty's daughters making straight down the primrose path they say simply that she has "temperament. . . ." When a ne'er-do-

well eluded sobriety and his creditors; he had the artistic temperament. . . . True, all true, and yet, when a great artist touched the words, how they glowed! When Locke's "Beloved Vagabond" was drunken, we thought of the drunken yet ever noble Charles Lamb; when he assumed a Verlainesque mantle as dictator of a café where arts and isms were in the air and the smoke, it was yet never of a Verlaine's vices that we thought. Here, on page after page, was the artistic temperament made so charming that one almost forgave the many sins committed in its name. . . . It came, as always, to the art with which the thing was done. Always, in thinking of great works of art this is brought home to me:

The moment you can put your finger, or your phrase, definitely upon a work of art, that moment it loses something of its interest. If the charm of the thing is so definite that a critic can put it into this or that gallery, can classify it, catalogue it, or can even reproduce or hint its quality, then it has, for the most sensitive, too hard a glitter. We agree with Richard Realf that it is the subtle suggestion of the flowers and the children that is fairer than the flowers and the children themselves; indirection appeals more sharply than bluntness.

Have our American students of the arts, then, had any critic who upon the arts of music, of the theatre, and even upon the artistic temperament, has done anything at all comparable with that of George Moore?



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

IF it was not James Huneker, it was certainly no other. He alone, in America, made the subject of music (which in foreign fiction had ranged all the way from the sugar of "The First Violin" to the strong meat in "Evelyn Innes") fascinating to the general reader. He alone, indeed, attempted comprehension of all the arts in his criticism. He alone, as to sheer bulk upon our shelves, and as to anything like general public recognition, is comparable with our two Irish critics, Moore and Shaw. If it is Moore, and music, that have brought us to Mr. Huneker, in this present review, the latter's career as critic touches Shaw's at many points. Shaw began with paint, turning next to music, and then to the theatre, and making literature always. Huneker began, I think, with the theatre, and turned to music; reverted again to the theatre; and is now active in art-criticism, though nothing of his in that sort is so far between covers. In literature of any permanence, it was as a writer on music that he first made impression, and that is still his paramount virtue, versatile though he has been in other directions.

Essentially and primarily Mr. Huneker fulfilled the requirement of being intrinsically readable. Whether on music, the theatre, literature or paint, he is always readable. He is as unable to write badly as most others are to write well. In result we have him as the one critical artist who ranks internationally. Each succeeding book of his more firmly fixed him in international regard. Deservedly or not, by his persistence, his painstaking genius, his cosmopolitan sophistications, he winged to a point where he is the one champion we can put into the lists against the outlanders.

Reading Mr. Huneker was to realise that even to an American critic there were still possible adventures among masterpieces. Contemplation of our own arts seldom brought likelihood of either the adventure or the masterpiece; little seemed visible save a plateau of mediocrity entirely surrounded by money. Fortunate was the critical soul who could wing to where the masterpieces were, could adventure in that rarer air, and return to tell us of his discoveries, his fine moments and his exquisite emotions. Fortunate were we to have such a critical soul among us. In music and in drama Mr. Huneker guided us into paths that stimulated our intelligence, widened our delights. But, this must be pointed out: widening our outlook and his own renown internationally, he achieved that by working almost exclusively in exotic fields. He became a cosmopolitan critic, ranking near the other giants abroad; but he is hardly in anything an American. Neither the American subject, nor the American treatment, nor the American viewpoint is there. What he has done for the broadening of our appreciation in the drama never had half as much actual American application as did Mr. Nirdlinger's single volume.

Mr. Nirdlinger dealt with playwright, player and playgoer; he did not disdain the actual atmosphere of the American theatre; Mr. Huneker took us always into the merely literary and foreign air. . . .

A cosmopolitan, who happened to live in America. But who was not, primarily, interested in American art. As it was said of the genius of Poe, he only "happened to be an American"; there is no intrinsic evidence in his work to prove him of this country or of that. Note what he has written about, as the title-pages of his books show:

Chopin, Brahms, Tschaiikowsky, Richard Strauss, Liszt, Wagner, Verdi, Balzac, Flaubert, Nietzsche, Turgenieff, Ibsen, Strindberg, Becque, Hauptmann, Sudermann, Hervieu, Gorky, Duse, D'Annunzio, Maeterlinck, Bernard Shaw.

Do you find anything American there?

So much for his directly critical volumes. As to his volumes of stories—all studies in musical or otherwise artistic temperaments—note these titles:

“A Son of Liszt, a Chopin of the Gutter, Isolde’s Mother, An Ibsen Girl, Tannhäuser’s Choice, Hundling’s Wife, Siegfried’s Death, The Woman Who Loved Chopin. . . .”

And when you go beyond mere titles, and examine the texture of those tales whose titles disclose nothing, you will find neither milieu, nor characters, nor treatment that is American; it is all exotic, all cosmopolitan. But a cosmopolitanism into which enters less of American than of any other art. We move in a welter of the foreign; foreign giants, foreign scenes, and foreign attitudes confront us; there is hardly a stroke of the pen that has not its exotic significance.

Was not that, perhaps, one of the secrets of his success? For, as we have seen, in the general recognition he does actually, successfully, represent that American dodo-bird, the critic. Surveying, with proper critical philosophy, the world he would live and work in, may he not be imagined to have told himself, early in his career, that the successful—not to say safe—way pointed abroad, as far as possible from the domestic article? That, if idols were to be smashed, they must be idols as far from home as possible? . . . Certainly he abstained most cannily from any such iconoclasm, or such appreciation of homegrown iconoclasts, as might have brought about and upon him the destructive, crushing power of all those mighty forces leagued together in America to make plain speaking perilous.

Tell, if you like—so this warning has long run—foreign truths; never home truths. Walter Harte told home truths; his career died of it, even before he did. Ambrose Bierce told home truths, named names; had he not been one of the giants, his career, too, had been nipped; as

it is they only succeeded in delaying his renown. . . . So Mr. Huneker told the foreign truths. On the title page of one of his books he even put the line from Max Stirner: "My truth is the truth." Two of his dedications ran to Remy de Gourmont, and Richard Strauss. He chose rank with the great cosmopolitans among the critics, with Georg Brandes or Arthur Symons; though he seldom, even for comparison, harked homeward as often as they. Symons studied the literature of France, but of England also; perhaps my memory betrays me—and I cannot at this sitting re-read all those many delightful critical pages of his—but I do not think that in reading the complete volumes of Mr. Huneker you will become aware of any American art at all,—unless it be that of Edgar Allan Poe, whom Baudelaire translated. Even in that detail, you see, quite the cosmopolitan; our friends overseas have seldom considered any other American than Poe fit for the international Olympiad.

Well, all this prevision of Mr. Huneker's was well grounded. Aside from the canniness in the adoption of this scheme of criticism, aside from the equation of personal success involved, he was quite right in his survey of the home field; there were not enough creative giants here to make brilliant criticism worth while. Our facts, in this detail, went somewhat in the face of Henry James's dictum that only as a society becomes older, can it be critical; Mr. Huneker found his subjects abroad, but developed about them so brilliant a critical spirit as to shed more intellectual illumination than did the creative art of his compatriot contemporaries.

If there was something of compromise, something of the Jesuit's reasoning, in this choice of criticism, we who read are still the gainers. Why run, the very first time round, full tilt into the windmills, smash the immediate nearby idols, denounce familiar shams—why make, in short, enemies—and so hamper a career that might be of real value to the community? Was not discretion the

critic's better part? Discretion, and the far-sighted vision? Surely, surely. So, gratefully enough, we may conceive Mr. Huneker seeing things as they were, murmuring softly to himself: "Ich kenne meine Pappenheimer!" and entering the international, rather than the American, arena?

But the question opens too widely. We come to the comparison between all the arts, creative and critical,—whether what is fittest to survive is the art which smacks of the soil, or that which is simply art irrespective of geographical, racial or linguistic boundaries. . . . Which is too interminable a discussion. Let us, like Machiavelli and Mr. Huneker, take things as they are; let us consider those many fine pages in illuminative critical interpretation which he has given us.

He had, above all else, the rare, the happy gift of illuminating all he put his pen to. If there is one belief of my own that is almost a dogma with me, it is that the province of the writer is to interest, be he novelist, poet or critic. If you cannot get yourself read, of what value is your lore, your idea, your truth? That quality of readability is precisely the rarest among critics. It was for their eminent readability that those three Irishmen always seemed to me the paramount craftsmen of our time, the real Three Musketeers from Ireland. . . . Mr. Huneker combined gracefully technical skill and lore with a prose that immediately commanded attention.

His first considerable volume, that on Chopin, had the air of being a book on the right man by the right man. In his interpretation of the soul and the work of Chopin, he gave us much of himself; on every one of those pages was some touch proving it a labor of love. "Chopin: The Man and His Music" provided notably sympathetic insight into the character of that musician, and into the circumstances and qualities which moulded his work. The critic did his best to blow away illusions about the com-



poser's effeminacy, declaring his brain "masculine, electric, and his soul courageous," and pointing out that "in Chopin's early days the Byronic pose, the grandiose and the horrible prevailed—witness the pictures of Ingres and Delacroix; and Richter wrote with his heart-strings saturated in moonshine and tears. Chopin did not altogether escape the artistic vices of his generation."

Pungent, polished pages came as easily from this critic, as bombast from the majority; if at times he indulged in the cryptic, even that disclosed the surplus in him of an original vigor. Knowing nothing of the technics of music, you were able to read this man's musical criticisms as interestedly as if a great romantic novelist had you spellbound.

Upon the "Chopin" there followed several volumes of musical essays and stories. Though against some of the stories (as, for example, the volume called "Melomaniacs") could be brought the accusation that the style tended needlessly toward exotic syllables, in the main these books were the first which for technical understanding or for general entertainment were at all in the class with such work as Walter Pater's "Appreciations" or George Moore's "Impressions and Opinions" and his novels on music. This stuff of Huneker's was compact of both musical lore and a musical style. If his stories had sometimes too much the air of fantastic essays in criticism of the artistic temperament—if they were too easily employed by the intellectual snobs who hunger for strange creeds and sounding phrases—his deliberately analytic essays had all the charm of well written fiction, and the virtue of a forcible individuality.

Always what he wrote was literature. He wrote of music, of the theatre, of paint, and of letters—one of his chapters in the volume "Overtones" was on "Literary Men Who Loved Music"—and whatever he touched he

put into the amber of his own art. It was not fair to accuse him of living in the shadow of the giants, since he fulfilled always Wilde's test: being, as critic, himself an artist.

One feature that no observer can fail to remark about this most cosmopolitan of American-born critics is that, to his universality of view, all the arts are equal. If one predominate in him more than another, it is music, so that in his system of employing the phrases of color in analysing prose, those of literature in discussing the theatre, and those of music in describing paintings, it is the musical phrase he likes best. It is an old trick this, of interchanging the "patter" of the arts; it is not altogether admirable, it lends itself easily to ridicule, and it has been much abused; but if it be permissible at all, Mr. Huneker's use of it has behind it the vigor of his personality. All these tricks of the trade, all these sleights of technique, attract him—he seeks always to escape the commonplace, the hard bounds and limits set by this or that peculiar art—and he once went even so far as, improving upon Arthur Rimbaud's theory of the colors in our vowels, to invent an esthetic alphabet for the language of—Perfume.

A poet—as I think I pointed out in an earlier chapter—once confessed to me that, were he able to, he would use another language than his own. That strange bent of one type of craftsman to escape from his craft's too narrow groove was voiced by Mr. Huneker when, as against the "artist in prose," he declared that:

" . . . far happier in the tone poet. Addressing a selected audience, appealing to sensibilities firm and tastes exquisitely cultured, he may still remain secluded. His musical phrases are cryptic, and even those who run fastest may not always read. . . . The golden reticence of the music artist saves him from the mortifying misunderstandings of the worker in verse and spares him the pangs which come from the nudity of the written word."

It is to be remarked, once again, that Mr. Huneker himself spared no efforts to keep his own written word so wrapped, so veiled, that not even the fastest mental runner could always read him patiently. Transmuting into literature all the other arts, he often brought so much of those foreign elements into his amalgam, that the result was nothing less than confusion; it was all the arts in solution; if, behind all this magic, we had not suspected a bland smile on the magician's face, neither readers nor critic had been human.

Though there has not yet been a volume of intendedly literary appreciation by Mr. Huneker, that interest runs well up with all the others in his books. He has written of the writers about music, Russian, French and English and German; he has discoursed upon the pragmatism of Professor William James—that Harvard pragmatist of the Open Door in American letters! and there is, indeed, very little that he has not included in his appreciations, saving always the art of his own country.

Upon American painters, it is true, he has given us many fine and high lights; but inasmuch as those are not yet made permanent, not yet between covers, we cannot here consider them.

There remains the theatre.

If we are to believe Mr. Huneker, our American theatre had nothing that could come internationally into discussion among serious critical spirits; when men voiced the phrases and the phases of the drama as modern Petersburg, Paris, Stockholm, Munich, Berlin or London knew them, no American name ever fell from their lips. So, turning his back upon America as a source, Mr. Huneker gave his country only the satisfaction of possessing so intelligent a critic as himself, who could at least represent America among the foremost cosmopolitan critics of the time. In his volume upon the European drama,

"Iconoclasts," he employed all his fecund gifts of appreciation, his vastness of comprehension, to lure us critically into domains which creatively he considered us unworthy to approach.

Once again he became, as in music, a guide into paths unbeaten by our mediocrities. Whether or no modern drama in America be indeed sterile; whether Mr. Huneker was justified or not in neglecting it; that is not now the point; he certainly, in this book, showed us many places where it was other than sterile. His keen vision dissected for us the modern path-breakers in the theatres of many tongues, and the book was indubitably, for many readers, the first really vivid impression of many great figures in to-day's dramatic art.

Whatever haze may have existed here about those foreign craftsmen, this book was calculated to dispel. Throughout all its pages, Mr. Huneker kept a context between the vital qualities in all those idol-smashers—Ibsen, Strindberg, Hauptmann, Sudermann, Becque, Hervieu, Gorky, Duse and D'Annunzio, Maeterlinck and Bernard Shaw—; he found all these Norsemen, Frenchmen, Germans, Italians and Celts to be real fellows in spirit; it was seldom when he could not discuss one in terms of the other. (Just as it was seldom he could not write of one art in terms of another.)

Inasmuch as a play by Becque was on the program for performance by the Criterion Independent Theatre in New York—of memories both grave and gay!—let us dwell a few moments on that chapter in Huneker's "Iconoclasts" devoted to this typical Parisian; it was, I think, the first chapter of that sort for American shelves. That compliment, indeed, was often enough to be Mr. Huneker's due; if we wished our appreciative observations extended into the foreign field, he was the one who first seriously undertook to guide us. . . . Mr. Huneker presented the arch-naturalist, Becque, who died in 1900,

as a gay and sparkling person, who persevered against perpetual failure; whose "The Ravens" was refused at seven theatres; and whose vitriol—note that word; I shall refer to it again!—aimed at Sarcey and Claretie must have been entertaining in the extreme. Our critic in one line exposes, typically, and for the general amaze at the colossal range of his cosmopolitanism, this Gallic crowd; "Becque was nearer classic form than Hervieu, De Curel, Georges Ancey, Leon Hennique, Emile Fabre, Maurice Donnay, Lemaitre, Henri Lavedan, and the rest of the younger group that delighted in honoring him with the title of supreme master."

"Vitriol" said Mr. Huneker about Becque. Yes; and A. B. Walkley wrote of "La Parisienne," Becque's most essential play, that "its irony bites like vitriol." The English critic asserted that it was "diabolically clever . . . a whiff of sulphur combined with *odeur de femme*." "Diabolically adroit and disconcerting," said Mr. Huneker. The phrases in cosmopolis, you see, have their conventions, which cross water easily.

It was in the chapter on Villiers de l'Isle Adam that we had Mr. Huneker at his best, and that, for the first time in this book, we could, as Americans, take other than cosmopolitan pride in his page. Upon such a subject as de l'Isle Adam, Huneker could move musically and mystically among the mystics; his own unquenched romantic soul emerged from the clangor and the crypticism of the super-critic; the account of Adam's death became, with Arthur Symons' note on Ernest Dowson, one of the memorable chapters in critical sympathy. And here we came at last to an American, to Poe. Always, among these internationals, it is only by Poe that we count at all. Huneker had written that "Poe is a child compared to Strindberg in the analysis of morbid states of soul"; but now he was forced to admit Poe as father to a breed of notable European men of letters. Personally and ar-



tistically Adam came straight from Poe; both were birds of the night (in the popular legends, at any rate), was-trels of genius. Here follows the one virtue Huneker can allow us, coming thereby to the identical conclusion to which I drive in this book, that if we have had giants in the past, to-day we have nothing, nothing but Money, and the Open Door, and rubbish by and for the millions:

“Poe is the literary ancestor of nearly all the Parnassians and Diabolic groups—ah, this mania for schools and groups and movements in Paris!—Poe begat Baudelaire and Baudelaire begat Barbey D'Aureville and Villiers del'Isle Adam, and the last-named begat Verlaine and Huysmans; and a long chain of other gifted men can claim these two as parents. But they all come from Poe; Poe, who influenced Swinburne through Baudelaire; Poe, who nearly swept the young Maeterlinck from his moorings in the stagnant fens and under the morose sky of the lowlands. If we have no great school of literature in America, we can at least point to Poe as the progenitor of a half-dozen continental literatures.”

Poe, you see, always Poe. In the opinion of the internationals,—and we can count Mr. Huneker only in that group—American literature has never gone beyond Edgar Allan Poe. Some day, perhaps, a twentieth century Baudelaire may discover Bierce. . . .

Meanwhile, on the note of Poe we may leave Mr. Huneker. It is as near as he comes (saving slight reference to Henry James, another international) to any glance at the art of his own country.

We can at least rejoice that this so penetrating and brilliant critic is himself American. His judgments are true, his sympathy is wide, and the expressed form his critical emotions take is a delight to lovers of style. He is almost our only conspicuous representative in cosmopolitan criticism to-day.

The critic who comes quickest to my mind in seeking a

European equivalent to Mr. Huneker's quick appreciations, as well as to his flair for outland art, is Arthur Symons. Many things Symons said in many beautiful ways. "A divining rod over hidden springs," he called Walter Pater's criticism, "criticism which, in its divination, its arrangement, its building up of many materials into a living organism, is itself creation, becomes imaginative work in itself"—a definition that may not easily be bettered. Sometimes, like Mr. Huneker, Symons searches somewhat too zealously for the clever phrase, as when he said of Wilde that "the whole man was not so much a personality, as an attitude," which was but a paraphrase of Von Buelow's phrase about the tenor. Chiefly I remember most what Symons wrote about the misapprehension concerning Decadence, an epithet that has been bestowed on many of the foreigners with whom Symons and Huneker concerned themselves critically; the passage occurs in Symons's chapter on George Meredith:

Meredith is in the true, wide sense—as no other English writer of the present time can be said to be—a Decadent. The word decadent has been narrowed in France and in England, to a mere label upon a particular school of very recent writers. What decadence, in literature, really means is that learned corruption of the language by which style ceases to be organic and becomes, in the pursuit of some new expressiveness or beauty, deliberately abnormal.

If some of our cheaper phrase-mongers would only repeat that paragraph over to themselves daily as their Collect for the Day!

And so we come to the conclusion of our long tale of comparisons. Abhor them as we may, without them we had never come to adequate perception of the petty place America holds to-day in the literary ranks of the nations to-day. Poe, always Poe—*und weiter nichts!* . . .

Poe, who was above all else a great Man of Letters; a Man of Letters whose like you must strain your eyes mightily to find here to-day, unless you quote what, in this book of mine, has been said nowhere else, certainly not by the Round-Table of the Atlantic Coast. Poe, who worked in every form of literary art, save only the novel, that ridiculously inartistic expansion and perversion of the short-story. . . . The novel, which to-day expresses all there is of American literary industry. . . .

Between Poe, who despised the novel, and whom posterity calls great—and the present case of American literature, in which the novel is supreme, you have the entire vast gulf.

If the space given the small crew who in America have attempted serious criticism is small, it is just what logically was theirs. If I was able to name one critic of the theatre; another who ranked with the cosmopolitans and the all-round-men; I was straining a point for optimism. I know well enough that the army of outraged observers will cry aloud at the multitude of omissions; they will assure me that so-and-so is admittedly a critic of the first rank; they will froth and they will fume; but if they can show me that their favorites have ever written a line that was not mere pandering to conditions rather than an effort to better them, that they have ever had real minds of their own and courage to speak them—I shall be surprised into the most humble apologies.

That we have had no such trio as those Three Irish Musketeers, Wilde, Shaw and Moore, I contend.

If this book has not proven that, if we had had such critics as those, our American literature might not now be fallen on such evil days, rank and rotten with prosperity, it has failed.

So to my summing up.

I have shown what, for shamelessness about the sexual,

the ladies did for us, at the same time that others of them were upholding the doctrine of the fig-leaf in art. I have shown what was done in chronicling the evolution of man as a social animal, in England and in America; and what share in such evolution the item of language, spoken and written, had. I have shown how the dominant note on our side of the Atlantic was quantity, and how quality suffered. I have shown how, at root of this condition, was our lack of proper criticism. There was my Case, and there my Cause.

And now for one last brief review, one quick summing-up, and a farewell effort—lest too bitter a taste remain!—at optimism.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

WE have seen, we see daily, that there is no longer any question of the prosperity of American literature. The bare cataloguing of the sheer volume of printed production is done so loudly and so variously that it is almost impossible, for even those persons who prefer any employment in the world to the reading of books, to escape altogether some familiarity with such statistics. The names of our most popular authors, our most popular books, and the number of their readers, obsess our vision as continuously as do the names of the liquors, the lozenges, the breakfast-foods and the actresses with which the town is placarded. Directly, or indirectly, American Literature, both Preferred and Common, is now among the standard securities.

Whether, to continue the jargon of finance, its position is the result of market manipulation, or of intrinsic value; whether it can afford, without loss from its actual prestige and principal, to continue its present dividends; whether what is now Preferred is really Common, or whether the Common is actually mere Water—these be far graver, larger questions, and it was into these that this book has tried to go. To the general public the present prosperity looks tangible enough. The time when the man of letters was a sort of vagabond, in the popular apprehension, seems gone. Disrepute on his part is no longer held either inevitable or conventional; he may come to our house-parties like any other person of decent quality, and though he be not fashionable, it will still be forgiven him if he is fanciful.

Some part of this prosperity has come from the actual boom in fiction; another has come by way of the theatre.



Professors at our universities, uneasy in their chairs of Literature—whence only too often they issued too mild edicts, the baleful effects of which we have seen—have written plays and waxed unprofessorially rich. By this means or that, the game goes on most merrily; the prizes constantly increase. The character of the publicity accorded our writers grows more and more pompous, not to say absurd, until we are now as accustomed to read that the author of “Mrs. Patch’s Wig” spends the summer in Speonk or the winter on Elliott’s Key, as we are that Mrs. Phil Lydig has had her portrait painted again. We may find, if we care for that sort of thing, books of portly size, of grandly glazed photographs, and of austere avoirdupois, which depict the magnificence in which our authors live when they are at home—which is seldom. Between society and literature there is a flirtation that is almost a liaison; on the one hand we have females of fashion depicting the life fashionable to its ’nth degree of mirthlessness; on the other we have men of letters describing the week-ends, the country-house parties, the huntings and shootings—in short, the imitation of the Englishman’s love for outdoors—among our best people, as surely and as easily as if they themselves were in that gallery.

Merrily the game goes on.

Make your game then, ladies and gentlemen, make your game! For is there not, after all, just a chance that in this lovely gamble, the public, that final arbiter—whether in stocks, in politics or in literature—may come out with the *croupier’s* cry of “Nothing more goes!”

After us, you say, the deluge? Yes, but from time immemorial that desire to catch the very top figure of the market, to get out the very instant before the inevitable “slump,” has been an avenue to ruin.

Whether or not this present prosperity can last, its divorce from actual merit is absolute. Year after year has seen an increasing quantity of “great” novels, out-

selling all previous "best sellers"; year after year the regular purveyors of this stuff have been found at the old stand. We have known exactly what we would get, and from whom; and that is exactly what we have got—more's the pity! Let us not name their names again. There they are; you cannot escape them; the newspapers assure you each one of them has written the story of the year, and you, afraid of being deemed eccentric, have believed them.

The cause—alike for this splendid level of apparent prosperity as for the boundless depths of mediocrity—we have seen; it lay with the critics.

The surest way, in all these recent years, to incur the disfavor of American publishers has been to tell the truth about their wares; so much have they come to take for granted the incapacity or the venality of those deputed to pass judgment about books in our public prints. If you chose independence, if you continued on a path of scrupulous rectitude in criticism, the rebuke of the publishers was stern indeed: they simply waited until, on some fatal, foolish day, you turned creative author. They remembered; oh, yes—they remembered; you could offer them anything from "Kim" to Khayyam and have it refused by one of the million *clichés* kept for that purpose, the *cliché* that your book was "not exactly suitable" to the demands of their special custom, or the *cliché* stating that "our fall (—or spring—or winter—or summer—) lists are just closed." With the pleasantest of phrases, the most specious of reasons, the publishers saw to it that you remained as negligible a quantity as possible; your quality might be what it pleased. You were forced to live upon the accretions of your conscientious rectitude;—always supposing that you had seriously intended making a living out of telling the critical truth about our letters.

You will recall how much we hear, from time to time, about the danger to the American theatre from a so-

called trust. There came once a rival trust; amalgamation; dissension; and occasionally some open warfare against both their houses. During the battles the general air was cleared a little; the salient truth was pounded into the public that a healthful condition of the drama could be maintained best by a free field for all. The public may never really have cared; but, at any rate, they were told they should care. . . .

Who, meanwhile, was attempting a similar campaign for our literature?

Until lately, the way seemed lonely indeed. Tilting at windmills, fighting a hopeless fight; that is what critical truth-telling seemed. Until quite lately,—when some faint signs started, here and there, showing that our dismal level of mediocrity was moving others than myself to nausea. From quarters as far apart as Franklin Square and the American colony of Munich, came, not so long ago, expressions of disbelief in the perfections of American criticism. What but the other day was a heresy of which I stood almost the singular exponent may yet become a question of the hour, as, in the dog days, the ventilation in the Subway, or the expression of the seaserpent's smile. If there is one thing more sure than another, it is that in matters of this sort we are as sheep; opinions come in waves. If presently you are deluged with doubts and declamations upon our literary imperfections, I shall by no means be surprised; and I should take all possible credit.

That we need such an awakening this book should have proved. An awakening as thorough as that which in Italy lit the torch for many centuries of European art. . . . Any sign of stirring from our deadly slumber, our fatal complacency, is to be welcomed. Tentative as have been the signs of a rising dissatisfaction with things as they are—you must never, you know, all the authorities agree in maintaining, disturb things as they are, especially if you want peace, or a quiet life, to

say nothing of material success!—they may still bring the hope that we are not too fatally mired in prosperous mediocrity. Feeble as this murmuring of discontent may be, it shows that at last the reasoning members of the American body literary chafes against the spineless criticisms which instead of protecting the public from shoddy, takes the attitude of the unscrupulous auctioneers. If ever that murmuring swells in volume, if ever we have that awakening of which we stand in such need, those who are now so complaisant will doubtless soon be screaming forth the story of how they helped the good work. In that chorus I would not care, for very humor, to join.

Let us not mince the matter too fine. Where the others are still timorous, it is forthrightness the case needs. Quixotic as the attitude may seem to-day, let me once again, definitely, finally, declare myself upon this matter of criticism. Polite murmurings will not do. If there is really to be a cure, the knife must go keenly to the root of the evil.

Greed and dishonesty are the primal causes of the malign prosperity of our literature. Both are national traits. This grim fact has been too often proven for dispute. You need only go to the disclosures of Lexow as to the police, Hughes as to insurance, and the Government as to railroads—even if your sense of humor does not allow you to forget that Thomas Lawson lives in a glass house. Politics, insurance, finance, and public service of every sort do not differ from literature in their conduct, here in America.

Greed, not logic, dictated the rule, so cardinal in many newspaper offices, that criticism of literature be subservient to the advertising department. The argument would seem to be that the public is a fool, and wants, in the supposedly critical columns of the paper, not honest judgments, but merely explanatory verbiage, or adulation somewhat differently phrased from those in the

paid advertisements. (An argument supported by professors of various sorts, including many whose excursions into pragmatism should have taught them logic.) Next, the newspaper manager argues, or he has discovered to his sorrow, that to expect sound and honest criticism from men who are paid, by him, so little salary that their hope of a future lies rather from the publishers (whose wares they sedulously puff) than from him, is a utopian dream. If you told him that by paying a decent wage to his critic, making him independent of the exactions both of the advertising department and the book-publisher, he might gain for his paper a reputation far beyond what its system of echoing the advertisement brings, he would reply that he did not believe you, for one thing, and that for another, it would be next to impossible to find the reviewer able and willing to keep completely clear of prejudice, hopes of personal literary preferment, or more sinister motives.

Greed and dishonesty, greed and dishonesty!

Greed makes our newspapers fail to see that really sound criticism must, in any reasonable audience, sell more books than mere indiscriminate eulogy possibly can. The average trained observer of our general conscience has long ago made up his mind that we are a people dishonest by choice of following the line of least resistance; the argument of the average newspaper proprietors, is, roughly, that the given average reader is not himself sufficiently honest to credit any critic with honesty. Why, then, go to the trouble and the expense, of engaging honesty for the critical enterprise?

Sadly enough one must admit the partial truth of the contention. The way of the scrupulously honest critic has been made thankless. Even in quarters where we might expect more than the average intelligence, the average standard of honesty, the average belief in mankind, we rarely find belief in the honesty of critical assertions. If we consistently decry the incompetent, we



are merely—declares the community at large—venting spite at our own non-success; if we find a fine exception to the mediocre average and give vent to eulogy, we are declared to be puffing some friend or other. So, upon widely distributed premises of dishonesty, the impossibility of critical honesty is propounded by the world. Finally, if in a hapless career of honesty, I praise the work of one who is notoriously my enemy, or censure the work of a familiar friend, I am considered somewhat dangerously mad.

To attempt convincing people who are themselves but doubtfully honest that one may have toward the art of literature and toward the public such an attitude of scrupulosity as compels censure of a bad work, even though it be by a friend, praise of a good work, even though it be an enemy's—that is to speak in an unknown tongue.

When the easy tolerance of dishonesty which has for so long been the typical American attitude shall finally disappear, as far as our letters are concerned, then may we really hope for reform in criticism and a consequent improvement in the quality of what is created. Then the absurdity of our prevailing newspaper criticism will become apparent, and will pass away. The spilling of the entire supply of eulogistic epithets each time that statistics report a new "best seller"; and the writing about literature by underpaid reporters or unpaid diletanti—all these things will then cease. From the ranks of the honest newspaper critics who, under an honest system, and with an honest audience, might rise to general recognition, there might even be graduated another critic of the cosmopolitan type, like Walter Pater or Sainte Beuve. How little that type of critic exists here, we have seen in this book; the noise of the newspapers drowns him out; it is with the newspapers the reform must begin.

That finest type of critic that I dream of—let me try, for the last time, to sketch him again. . . .

That criticism, to be most effective, most just to the trinity chiefly concerned—author, critic and public—should be impressionistic, I have tired declaring. Admission of this theory still leaves open many differences in method.

There is the method, advocated by Edgar Allan Poe, that it is the critic's legitimate task to point out and analyse defects, to show where improvements might have come, and so aid the cause of letters in the abstract as well as the victim in the concrete. I have, myself, put that case in the brief, bald terms suitable to the conditions of to-day; I have said we needed keepers at the gate, not lackeys to open to all comers.

Goethe, again, held that what we needed from a critic was an exposition, not of the defects, but only of the merits of the writer or his work. It was this method which Walter Pater, for another instance, so delicately elaborated; what he disliked he utterly ignored; what he liked he so lovingly tried to make us understand that he became in effect what Wilde called "the critic as artist; his illumination of his subject was in itself an artistic entity; a finished creation."

For all these differing methods my general theory is still necessary; you come back, in each case, to the authority of the critic who has formulated his impression. In the one case, back of the analysis of defects we like to think of the discrimination of, say, a Poe; in the other case, the indiscriminate puffery of newsmongers leaves us cold, while Pater's exquisitely expressed divination of another's achievements fills us with vivid pleasure. We must have gained faith, first, in the taste, the judgment, of the critic; after that it is for him to swing, as intoxicatingly, as convincingly, as he may, the incense of his impressionism.

The day of the critic who enacts the part of the machine rather than the god; who is the bloodless Jugger-naut bearing intangible standards—that day is passed. We no longer, even in our newspapers, consider what the judgment of this or that journal is, but what is the judgment of the journal's critic. If one of those discussions on Anonymity, due every ten years or so, were to recur now, it would take place over the vastly changed conditions that obtain since the passing of the old school of personal journalists—for whose returning ghosts we should continually pray! As to those critics who upheld the good old academic standards, who set immutable laws,—why, if at all, do we remember their theory or their practice? Because of the individuals who wielded those theories, those methods.

Turn which way you will, I do not see how you will avoid that circle: it is ever to the individual critic that we come at last. Given the proper individual, then the impression vivid enough to bring the critical sparks—and you have the criticism that has real worth.

The proper individual, I said, and the impression vivid enough; phrased otherwise it comes to this, in tracing out my valuation of impressionistic criticism, that certain critics will be at their best only on certain subjects. In this epicurean system of selection what applies to the reader applies also to the critic; the reader must select the critic who comes nearest suiting his own taste, for he will not be human if he take advice that is put so as to offend his peculiar temper. Even so, the critic should strive to ignore what is distasteful, and deal only with what will call out the full freshness of his impressions. If he can go still further, as Walter Pater did, so understanding a subject as to expound it generously “to the full measure of its intentions,” he becomes a supreme creative artist, ennobling even, it may be, what without him had remained less significant. . . .

And there, *in petto*, you have my critical faith.

And there, in large or in little, you have the sort of critic whom you may burn many candles to discover in this wide land of ours.

Meanwhile, let the game go merrily on. Make your game, ladies and gentlemen! The game is merry and profitable; but—by all the canons of art, it is nothing less than a gambling game, with dishonesty and greed the main factors.

The single ray of hope the optimist may extract from all the literary tumult and the shouting of the publishers—easily comparable to a “bull market” in Wall Street—is that there are some far, faint indications of reform, of disillusionment.

Only in that hope may one continue on one’s critical way, declaring good as he sees it, decrying the base, striving for sympathy with the author with whom one’s temperament is in tune, and for justice to those whom one may not like but must respect; and remembering always that one’s duty toward the reading public is to guide it toward enlightenment, and to keep it from wasting its time. To convince the public of one’s critical capability and honesty, that is the only way; the vividness and the illuminant expression of one’s personal impression must tell the tale either for success or failure. Personality, temperament, taste, honesty, and style—prove to the public that you have these, and you are a critic worthy of the name.

When this sort of critic is the rule, not the exception, then may American literature expect to catch a glimpse of Parnassus instead of browsing forever upon the plains of complacent mediocrity.

*Basta!*





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